

Screen



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Women's films in the '80s

Questions of genre and problems with quality

Cultural studies/multi-cultural studies

Alternative television in the United States

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THE EDITORS WISH TO DEDICATE THIS ISSUE
TO THE MEMORY OF

GILLIAN SKIRROW

(1939–1987)

editorial

Screen seems to have developed an uncanny knack of changing with the decade. At the end of 1970, with its parent body, SEFT (the Society for Education in Film and Television), already twenty years old, the journal relaunched itself as a theoretical and critical quarterly devoted to the development of film culture and theory. The subsequent achievements of the seventies are widely acknowledged. In the winter issue of 1980, entering the eighties and the thirtieth year of SEFT, the editorial announced 'a revised project and a new format', and set out to find a wider constituency and a more inclusive agenda. Now, entering the nineties, again with a new design, there are even more fundamental changes to announce: the final dissolution of SEFT; the transfer of the ownership of *Screen* and its editorial offices to an academic base in Glasgow; and the transfer of publication to a very prestigious academic publisher, Oxford University Press. Significantly, while the policy changes of the seventies and eighties were motivated internally out of a desire for new directions, the structural changes of the nineties have been produced by external forces, largely to do with the economics of grant-in-aid bodies in a period of cultural recession, which SEFT fought for much of the decade to hold off.

As the new editors of *Screen* we must have mixed feelings about being the beneficiaries of SEFT's demise, and about inheriting a journal which trails clouds of glory (mixed with occasional heavy weather) behind it. For the constituency which gathered round it in Britain, SEFT has been of enormous importance – in its educational work and its weekend schools as well as in its publications. The publications, *Screen* and *Screen Education* (and at a more local level, *Initiatives*) established in Britain an intellectual framework which generated both an excitement about theory and a commitment to the 'projects' of the journals; the Society, particularly in the seventies, provided the contexts in which a kind of community could form and the commitment could be collectively elaborated. Out of

this division of labour came many of the theoretical debates, the practical initiatives and the intellectual alliances which stimulated the development of film, television and media education, and which informed many areas of independent film and video practice. To record the demise of SEFT, then, gives the editors no pleasure, and those of us who have been closely associated with both the Society and the journals in the past would wish to acknowledge our personal indebtedness to the part SEFT has played in our own intellectual and professional formation

At the same time, it would be foolish to deny our enthusiasm for the opportunity which we now have to re-shape *Screen* once again for a new decade (Perhaps, also, we should admit to a little unworthy pleasure at pulling something out of that square mile of London from which British film and television culture has always seemed to receive the Word.) We are glad that we were not the only ones who were determined that *Screen* should survive the dissolution of SEFT, and we have been encouraged by the interest, both national and international, which has been shown in the journal's continuation

In Summer 1987, André Frankovits wrote a comradely and devastatingly compassionate letter to *Screen* to explain why he would no longer be distributing the journal to bookshops in Australia. More in sorrow than in anger, he explained why *Screen* seemed to him to be a 'desperately depressing object to deal with'. He connected this with a particular form of parochialism which he identified with 'the Left' in Britain, and with a certain grimness associated with *Screen's* inability to present itself as an interesting and attractive commodity: '*Screen* has no feel for commodity fetishism. *Screen* has no sass.' Most worryingly, he suggested that there wasn't much hope or surprise in *Screen*:

... at Amnesty International [where Frankovits now works] we make a set of tea-towels marked in bright colours, WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE. Using one of these the other night, it occurred to me that maybe the simple trouble with *Screen* for the casual interested reader here is that it doesn't really brim with hope. Hope depends a lot upon little surprises, especially in dark times – and there weren't enough of them in *Screen* (let alone any big ones)

Reading the accusation of Left parochialism as a British subscriber, it seemed a witty and fairly acute piece of Australian pom-bashing (and reading it as a Scottish or Welsh or Irish or even Northern English subscriber, there may have been more points of recognition than André Frankovits would have anticipated) Reading it now as editors, it seems to pose a set of specific problems which

we will have to address. We cannot promise to reform the Left, or to transform British political discourse. In very general terms our editorial policy can be expressed as a continuation of the commitments and concerns of *Screen* and SEFT in the past. There are, however, radical breaks in the conditions in which we are working that make a difference, and should be recognized.

In the first place, with six editors all of whom are working academics, with an academic editorial base and an academic publisher, it will be difficult for *Screen* to maintain a pretence any longer that it is not an academic journal. However it may be experienced in Australia (the perception is certainly not shared in the U S), there is a tradition of shame on 'the Left' in Britain attached to the professionalization and institutionalization of intellectual life in the 'academy'. 'Academic' is used to describe what you are rather than the job you do, and this applies to journals as well as to people. For a journal such as *Screen*, in many ways a product of 1968, and with a continuing commitment to the political – the politics of representation, of institutions, of race, of gender, of class – 'academic' has been a term of abuse.

Our response to this can only be to try to redefine 'the academic', and, while resisting the closed elitism of 'the academy' (André Frankovits will recognize the use of the scare-quotes to fend off the demons of essentialism), to attempt to re-establish the usefulness of academic, even of scholarly, work. In encouraging hard-edged empirical and historical research into film and television as a part of (not all of) what the journal is about, we hope to provide some of the 'little surprises' which break up the monoliths of received theoretical wisdom. We also hope to provide a space for the publication of research work, including that of research students. This is a facility which has been sadly lacking in Britain.

At the same time, we want to address the diversity of interests – outside the academy and formal education – which *Screen* and SEFT have addressed in the past. We wish to keep the journal open, for instance, as a point of exchange between theory and practice. While engaging with the popular, we are also committed to ideas of independence and the avant garde – or of various avant gardes. In many ways, what made *Screen* distinctive among journals of cultural theory and criticism was its awkward fit with the 'academic'. While knowing our institutional place, we continue to value that awkwardness.

Secondly, we attach some importance to the fact that *Screen* is no longer at the metropolitan centre of things. This is not a chauvinistic point, and we would hesitate to claim that *Screen* is now a Scottish journal in any sense that even the most ambivalent nationalist would recognize. But it is now non-metropolitan. In Britain, with its particular configuration of core and periphery, this has some significance. At a practical level, it may simply mean that we will

have all the irritations of having to go to London for many of the resources – stills libraries, cuttings files – which it takes to run a journal; but at other levels of editorial work there is a more positive sense in which the ‘peripheral mentality’ is more accustomed to looking outside its own boundaries for its resources than is the ‘mentality’ of the core. This is why there may be more resonance than Frankovits suspects between Sydney and Glasgow: many of us recognize that feeling that there is a ‘universal’ discourse emanating from the centre which does not quite describe the universe which we daily inhabit. The strength of the metropolis as an intellectual centre is that the sheer density of its interest groups and agencies generates a volume of activity; its weakness is that the volume may be the noise of people talking to themselves.

Editorially, both nationally and internationally, we hope that this geographical de-centring will be reflected in the style and feel of the journal *Screen* remains a British journal, and British film and television culture badly needs the space in which to advance its own debates – as in this issue, Charlotte Brunsdon and Alan Lovell address debates around broadcasting legislation and around the development (or not) of the Workshop movement. But we are also interested in developing *Screen* as a point of international exchange both in theoretical and political debates, and in the productive (and surprising) conjunctions of local conditions and local histories. William Boddy’s article on alternative television in the US suggests possibilities which have been absent in British discussions of the development of cable television. And, though *Screen* in the seventies was identified as an entry-point for ‘French theory’, we now have to recognize that we have a great deal to learn from theoretical and empirical work which has been carried out in the rest of Europe, and the rest of the non-Anglophone world.

In passing, and in case we concede too much to André Frankovits, it is worth pointing to a peculiarity of the British public sphere which may explain some of the missionary tendencies which he objects to. there is still a working assumption in certain areas of British cultural life (the media is one such area) that intellectual activity, even the activity of radical intellectuals (even that of academics, up to and including writing articles in *Screen*) may make a difference to public policy and public perceptions. There is a sense (unusual in, for instance, the United States) that someone outside the academy might be listening. There is even some evidence to encourage the belief – around the shaping of Channel Four, for instance, as Charlotte Brunsdon notes in her article. This may have something to do with the specific formation of British culture, but it is not something we should easily lose.

Two points of practical policy should be mentioned. We propose to

have a regular 'Reviews' section for both reviews and review articles, and a regular 'Reports and Debates' section. Each will have its own editor. Since we propose that the journal will focus fairly sharply on film and television, or, more accurately, on cinema and broadcasting (it will not, that is, be a journal of Cultural Studies), one of the purposes of the 'Reviews' section will be to offer a space in which debates in the analysis of the wider culture can be brought to bear on the analysis of our bit of culture. The 'Reports and Debates' section is what it says: a section in which events, conferences, policies, legislation, or even simply tendencies can be brought to attention, and in which arguments can be provoked.

The second point is that we are less wedded than has been the case in recent years to theme issues. There will be 'Special Issues' (there is a Call for Papers in this issue for a Special Issue on Criticism), but they will be special, rather than routine. This implies no criticism of theme issues; but, partly, we do not have the resources to construct (and commission) themes on a quarterly schedule, and, partly, we would like to see if opening the schedule will open the agenda. We hope that this will encourage the submission of papers which would be difficult to categorize within a theme, or, at least, that such papers will not have to wait until a theme emerges. We also hope that it will encourage new writers. *Screen* has had an excellent record over the past decade in bringing in new writers and in providing the space for new and productively diverse voices. We would like to continue and develop that tradition.

The continuities, then, are strong. The commitments – to the elaboration of theory, to the politics of representation, to ideological critique, to the analysis of institutions and institutional histories – remain. While regretting without reservation the demise of SEFT, we believe that the new structural place of *Screen* in the academy – and outside the metropolitan centre, can re-define it in quite positive ways: a redefinition which structural continuity always resisted. André Frankovits, concluding his letter of resignation, says

... in ending my pleasant professional association with the publication, I must say that personally I continue to feel the confident hope that its life may be long, and that you will one day surprise us all ...

We hope we will, and we await the renewal (or opening) of his subscription.

THE EDITORS

Guerrilla in the midst: women's cinema in the 80s

TERESA DE LAURETIS

This essay was commissioned for the Conference 'High Culture/Popular Culture: Media Representation of the Other' held at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy, February 27 to March 4, 1989. The proceedings of the conference will be published in the forthcoming book Other Representations: Cross-Cultural Media Theory, ed. by John G. Hanhardt and Steven D. Levine.

'WOMEN'S cinema' is a term whose definition or field of meaning is almost as problematic and contested as the term 'feminism' itself. Thinking about the critical history of women's cinema – a historically specific set of practices that we can easily agree exists, and yet is difficult to categorize in any but the vaguest and immediately questionable terms – offers a starting point to reconsider other film-critical terms used to distinguish, classify, or simply speak of practices of cinema in the last twenty years or so: terms more often paired in opposition to one another, such as Hollywood vs. independent, avant-garde vs. classical, entertainment vs. political, alternative vs. mainstream cinema.

Like women's cinema, these terms have no precise discursive boundaries or objective status, and are open to redefinition in light of historical changes that may occur, that have occurred, in cinematic production, distribution and reception: they serve as general references for thinking about current directions in cinema and the media as forms of cultural production and of the social imaginary. This 'social imaginary' has, of late, increasingly focused on 'the other' – witness Craig Owens's often cited 1983 article 'The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism', a special issue of *Discourse* edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha in 1987 with the title 'She, the Inappropriate/d Other', and the very conference for which this paper was written, 'High Culture/Popular Culture: Media Representation of the Other'.¹ An important critique of the notion of 'the other(s)' – and, to my mind, a necessary corrective to the overgeneralized use of the term, with its fashionable currency and

¹ Craig Owens 'The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 57–82; Trinh T. Minh-ha, ed. special issue of *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, no. 8 (Fall–Winter 1986–87).

quasi-theoretical status – is made by Coco Fusco in a recent issue of *Framework*. ‘There is a tremendous amount of multinational corporate investment in multiculturalism in the US . . . that underlies and underwrites what is perceived in the mainstream media as . . . our new sense of national culture as “enriched” by “diversity”’, writes Fusco, who consequently refrains from using terms that refer specifically to race and/or ethnicity, preferring instead the term ‘subaltern’

My current area of interest is in how subaltern media is positioned, absorbed and consumed. As an historically Euro-American film culture takes on post-colonial discourse, the issues of race and representation, and the contexts of those debates, become the focus of increasing attention, conflict and commodification. It is because of the intensified commodification of subaltern experience that we speak of crossover successes in North America and Europe. And it is within the context of this activity that we must examine practices which may or may not be channelled into the ‘crossover’, or which may or may not contest this process.²

2 Coco Fusco, ‘About Locating Ourselves and Our Representations’, *Framework*, no. 36 (1989) pp. 7–8

For me as well it is not possible, after twenty years of feminist work, to think of women or, for that matter, anyone as ‘the other’ – regardless of racial, cultural, sexual, or whatever differences. This paper will be concerned instead with cinematic representation as a mode of production, appropriation and expropriation of sociosexual differences, and with the strategies of legitimation and delegitimation by which those differences are re-contained in current films. Strategies of re-containment cannot be neatly allocated to one or the other side of the oppositions, say, mainstream vs independent or commercial vs. non-commercial, as they most often cut across them. In looking at how some of those strategies are deployed and take effect in spectatorship, my aim is at once to question and to redefine the terms of the critical discourse on cinema. First of all, women’s cinema – in the midst of all this, can it still function as an alternative practice, a guerrilla cinema, and under what conditions?

Women’s cinema may succinctly be defined as *a cinema by and for women*. But which women? Do we mean all women, across cultures and countries and the many differences that more and more articulate, and render increasingly elusive, terms like ‘feminist theory’ or even ‘feminism’ itself? Like them, if all-inclusive, or if simply inclusive, denotative, the term ‘women’s cinema’ becomes too literal, too liberal, banal and self-defeating. If too narrow, it becomes reductive, sectarian, exclusionary. And yet, what if one would like to exclude from the (political) category of women’s

cinema certain films made by women, whether as popular, entertainment films (e.g., the films of Lina Wertmüller), as films in the tradition of European art cinema (e.g., Agnes Varda, Margarethe von Trotta), or in the tradition of American independent cinema (e.g., Susan Seidelman)? Even such a short list is already problematic: these are films made by women, but are they made *for* women? Conversely, could one include in the category of women's cinema a film like Sergio Toledo's *Vera* (1987), made by a man but addressing the questions of gender and sexual difference more directly than do most women's films, or, on the other hand, Valeria Sarmiento's *El hombre cuando es hombre* (1982), made by a woman but all about men?

Such quandaries are not new, though they are renewed again and again for each of the various instances and practices of cinema that increasingly respond to the impact which feminism has made or is beginning to make. But they were posed already from the start of women's cinema, when it emerged in the context of the feminist film culture that developed with the women's movement in the late 60s and 70s. As Judith Mayne remarks, the term women's cinema initially had two different meanings which to some were diametrically opposed

First, women's cinema refers to films made by women. The filmmakers range from classical Hollywood directors like Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino to their more recent heirs, like Claudia Weill and Joan Micklin Silver, and from directors whom many feminists would just as soon forget, like Leni Riefenstahl or Lina Wertmüller, to other contemporary European directors concerned directly and consciously with female modes of expression, like Chantal Akerman and Helke Sander. They range as well from independent documentary filmmakers like Julia Reichert (co-director of *Union Maids*) and Connie Fields (*The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*) to more experimental independents attempting to reconcile feminist politics and avant-garde form, like Michelle Citron (*Daughter Rite*) and Sally Potter (*Thriller*).³

The other meaning, Mayne continues, referred to films made for women, but its referent was a particular film genre, popular throughout the 30s and 40s, and recently revived, a Hollywood product designed to appeal to a specifically female audience and pejoratively known as 'the weepies' until Molly Haskell renamed it 'the woman's film', and the name stuck.

While admitting that perhaps ultimately films made by women have little or nothing to do with Hollywood women's films, Mayne is against too stark an opposition between the 'inauthentic' and the 'authentic' portrayals of female experience in films made for women and by women respectively. She prefers 'to affirm the ambiguity of

3 Judith Mayne 'The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism' in *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick MD: University Publications of America and The American Film Institute 1984) p. 49

the term “women’s cinema” For in order to understand how women make movies, there needs to be some consideration of what relationships women have had, traditionally and historically, as filmmakers and as film consumers, to the medium.’ (p. 50) And hence her affirmation of the central role of feminist film criticism in the definition of women’s cinema Similarly, in the introduction to *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, where Mayne’s essay was reprinted in 1984, the co-editors proudly reaffirm the achievement of a close relationship of collaboration, of mutual support and interchange between feminist film critics, scholars, festival organizers, distributors, and filmmakers: ‘Thus, many of the political aspirations of the women’s movement form an integral part of the very structure of *feminist work in and on film*’ [emphasis added]⁴

What appears from even so brief a survey of the critical history of the term is, first, that women’s cinema refers to and includes not just a set of films or practices of cinema, but also a number of film-critical discourses and broadly-cast networks of cinema-related practices that are directly connected with the history of feminism and the development of a feminist sociopolitical and aesthetic consciousness Secondly, it’s clear that women’s cinema cuts across any easy division or opposition between high and popular culture, Hollywood and independent, mainstream and alternative cinemas. And moreover it destabilizes the criteria by which film-critical categories have been set up narrative, for example, which in Anglo-American film culture, though not in Latin America or in Europe, has long been opposed to avant-garde filmmaking. For, from early on, women’s cinema has included, or better, intervened in both narrative and non-narrative genres (documentary, autobiography, interview format), both avant-garde and ‘illusionistic’ films. In fact, if there has been one trait most markedly characteristic of women’s cinema, I would say that it has been *the project to work with and against narrative*, shifting the place of the look, playing with genre/gender crossing and reversal, image-voice disjunctures, and other codes of narrative construction – the seduction of narrative nowhere more evident than in Yvonne Rainer’s work from *Film About a Woman Who . . .* (1974) to *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985)⁵

Elsewhere I had occasion to write about narrative with regard to the history of women’s cinema and its relation to aesthetic and feminist theory.⁶ Although I cannot review my arguments here, they constitute the premises from which this essay proceeds and from which I now want to reconsider the notion of alternative cinema, whether or how it may function as a critique of dominant codes of representation, and whether or to what extent a cinema by and for women can still be seen as a feminist political project.

But to begin with, what is meant by alternative cinema today? Is

4 Mary Ann Doane Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams Feminist Film Criticism An Introduction’, in *Re-vision*, p. 5

5 See Yvonne Rainer, ‘Some Ruminations Around Cinematic Antidotes to the Oedipal Net(tles) while Playing with De Lauraedipus Mulvey or, He May Be Off Screen, but . . .’ *The Independent* vol. 9, no. 3 (April 1986), pp. 22–25 ‘More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/Backwater’ *Wide Angle* vol. 7, no. 1–2 (1985), pp. 8–12 and *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington Indiana University Press 1989) a volume containing the complete scripts of her films and other contributions by and about Rainer

6 Teresa de Lauretis ‘Rethinking Women’s Cinema Aesthetics and Feminist Theory’ (originally published in *New German Critique* no. 34, (Winter 1985)) and ‘Strategies of Coherence Narrative Cinema Feminist Poetics and Yvonne Rainer’ both in *Technologies of Gender Essays on Theory Film and Fiction* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1987) See also *Alice Doesn’t Feminism Semiotics Cinema* (Bloomington Indiana University Press 1984) especially ch. 5

7 Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 'Toward a Third Cinema', *Cinéaste* vol 4 no 3 (Winter 1970-71), p 4

'alternative' meant in the *strong sense* of the term, that is to say, synonymously with oppositional, as it was in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's proposal of a 'third cinema', a cinema of liberation? In contrast with the first, institutional and colonialist cinema, on the one hand, and, on the other, with a second, avant-garde, high-art cinema well on its way to institutionalization through aesthetic legitimation, the third cinema, as they saw it, was a cinema of the masses, a guerrilla-cinema whose conditions were 'making films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System.'⁷ Or, if it is difficult today to think of a System that one may oppose directly, from the outside, from a position of ideological purity and without complicity, is 'alternative' rather meant in a less stringent, or *weak sense*: as another option, perhaps, for either grassroots or emergent forms of the social imaginary, an option which would not replace but would coexist more or less peacefully with other, mainstream forms, if only given a chance (on the model, say, of cable or direct-access tv)? In other words, does the notion of alternative cultural forms have anything to do with hegemony and class or racial struggle, as it did in the parlance of the 60s and 70s, or does it loosely refer, in a perspective of postmodern pluralistic democracy, to those sectors of the social field that are allowed some cultural expression in the margins of what is called mainstream? In which case, does it still make sense to speak of a *dominant* culture, if not of a System? And further, does 'alternative' have to do with content or with form, or is this question itself moot in a postmodern cultural climate?

An excellent discussion of Third Cinema may be found in Paul Willemen's 'The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections'. He follows it from its early formulations in the 60s in Latin America, especially in the work of filmmakers and critics such as Solanas and Getino (Argentina), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa (Cuba), and Glauber Rocha (Brazil), to the recent reformulations offered by, for example, Teshome Gabriel with regard to cinema in Third World countries, up to the relevance and the political implications of the notion of 'third cinema' – as distinct from Third World cinema – for contemporary film culture in First World countries such as Britain or the United States. Willemen argues for Third Cinema in the First World as a lucid 'production of social intelligibility' that, both as filmmaking and as theoretical-critical work, may challenge 'English aspirations towards universality': 'This requires a particular emphasis to be given to "otherness", to the dialogue with unfamiliar cultural practices and traditions, while refusing to homogenise every non-EuroAmerican culture into a globalised "other".' At the same time, Willemen states his conviction that 'outsideness/otherness is the only vantage point from which a viable cultural politics may be conducted in the

UK The negotiation of the problems involved in otherness as a positional necessity is the precondition for a critical cultural practice'.⁸

Returning to the U.S. context, I will now ask – Are the following films alternative: *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Hector Babenco, 1984), *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985), *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Patricia Rozema, 1987), *The Brother from Another Planet* (John Sayles, 1984), *Dim Sum* (Wayne Wang, 1984), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986), *Yo Soy Chicano* (Luis Trevino, 1972), or *La Chicana* (Silvia Morales, 1980)? The answer, I suspect, is yes and no. Which means we have to reconsider and redefine the very notion of alternative cinema (in the weak sense), for its relationship to mainstream cinema would only be alternative with regard to very specific and local contexts of reception. Moreover, some of those films might be considered alternative in form, in their employ of film-stylistic procedures developed by avant-garde filmmaking or the political documentary of the early 70s, while others would be alternative in content, in their choice of topic, actors, and issues sociologically defined. Even so, in the case of the former, it might be borne in mind that the step from self-reflexivity to parody or self-indulgence has become much shorter in the 80s (to wit the current success of Pedro Almodovar and Percy Adlon); in the case of the latter, can one still see Spielberg's whitewashed *Color Purple* as in any way alternative, when one compares it with the formal originality and thematic daring of Alice Walker's epistolary novel? Or Babenco's reductive and subtly heterosexist *Kiss of the Spider Woman* when compared with, again, the formal innovation and discursive richness of Puig's gay novel?

If we say that those two films are in some way alternative to mainstream representations of Black culture and to homophobic images of gay men, respectively (and arguments have been made to that effect), we cannot call them alternative on the grounds that they effectively critique cinema itself. For, on the contrary, their success is based not just on presenting acceptable, or positive, images of social groups heretofore unrepresented, but on doing so in cinematic terms that are acceptable, legitimated, by the very apparatus of representation that has excluded them until now – and now appropriates, and so expropriates, their 'difference' in the service of its unchanged economic and ideological ends. Not the least instance of such an appropriation/expropriation, such a legitimation which is at the same time a mode of delegitimation, was noted by gay reviewers in the casting of William Hurt as Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*: for if Hurt received an Oscar for his portrayal of a Buenos Aires homosexual, while safely ensconced in the security of his well-established masculine, and straight, persona, it is because the Academy award recognized his 'artistry' in

9 For this point I am indebted to the work in progress of Eric Hickson, a doctoral candidate in History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz

portraying 'the other' – in performing, that is, exactly the kind of man he is not.⁹ Another instance of this strategy of legitimation and delegitimation occurred, in reverse, when the relatively unknown Patricia Charbonneau, who played the lead lesbian role in *Desert Hearts*, took great pains to re-establish a proper, straight and feminine, persona by giving interviews and appearing in the popular press photographed with her husband and child. In short, Hollywood doesn't believe in 'others', even as it gains from and applauds their 'portrayal' in motion picture art.

Thus, if I'm not willing to accept the term 'alternative' for such film practices, it's not that I want to insist on form for form's sake or to hold on to some modernist and elitist notion of aesthetic. Quite the contrary. One of the accomplishments of women's cinema, to my mind, is that it has defied those notions of aesthetic implicit in high art, while systematically critiquing the dominant forms of cinematic representation which are, after all, those of popular cinema. The feminist critique of representation might have intended to destroy, or to deflect, the lures and pleasures of narrative closure and identification, but it has also meant, and realized, a *shifting of the ground of intelligibility and pleasure*. And by shifting the very ground of representation, it has effectively unsettled the standard frame of reference of cinema – the standard frame of visibility, what can be seen, and eroticized – and altered the conditions of representability of the social subject.

In this sense, for example, Lizzie Borden's passage from *Born in Flames* (1983) to *Working Girls* (1986), which marks a move from independent to theatrical distribution circuits and consequently also, to some extent, a shift in the form of address (as well as intended audience), might be seen as a move from alternative to mainstream cinema. But in fact it doesn't work that way. For better or for worse, *Working Girls* doesn't work as mainstream cinema, even as it may no longer work effectively as women's cinema. I suggest that the reason it doesn't is that Borden has employed a non-standard frame of reference, of visibility, to represent the female body. She has de-glamourized it and – by cinematic standards – desexualized it; or, in film-theoretical terms, she has de-fetishized it, de-voyeurized it, making it into a functional, working body as opposed to a site of sexuality and domination by the gaze.

After a screening of *Working Girls* in Santa Cruz, as part of a sex-radical, and not uncontested, feminist effort to 'support the local sex business community', Borden stated that she intended 'to use the apparatus as neutral and to treat women as subjects of the look': to position the camera so that the women's bodies in the film would be shown as they themselves would see their own bodies, with their own eyes or in a mirror, so that the woman's body would not be shown or seen from the point of view of one wielding a camera or (as she put it) a speculum; so that, for example, as Molly sees

herself getting undressed, *she* would be the relay of the spectator's look at her body. My paraphrase of Borden's statements, as well as the direct quotations, all come from my own notes of the (unpublished) discussion which followed the Santa Cruz screening on January 29, 1988. But in a recently published interview (given in January 1987) Borden restates her project in very similar terms:

Most of the angles in the bedroom scenes are not subjective camera, but they're from a woman's point of view. There's no shot in the film where you see Molly's body the way a man would frame her body to look at it, except when she's looking at herself that way, in the scene where she poses with the guy in front of the mirror, for example. But, even there, I set up the shot so that if we are looking at her body in that scene, we're also looking at her eyes looking at her body. The first time you see her without any clothes on, she's alone with herself, and our gaze is involved with her watching herself.¹⁰

10 op. cit., p. 142

Moreover, that spectator is addressed as female: 'the audience, I assumed, was female', Borden said. The effect she sought to produce in her spectators was 'to see women [as we ourselves do] when we are alone, for reasons of education.' (The function of address is clear here, for Borden was speaking to a mixed audience but addressing it as an audience of women, just as her film is watched by a mixed audience, but addresses the spectator as a woman.) She reiterated this point by suggesting that her choice of locale, a middle-class brothel as a working environment relatively free of the risks and dangers of street hooking, was in effect 'a woman's space': downstairs, an everyday living space; upstairs, a work space where the women whose trade is male fantasies, take control of the men's fantasies and hence have control over their own work.

If Borden's proposal of the middle-class brothel as an updated



Working Girls
(Courtesy of Contemporary
Films)

version of *A Room of One's Own* has displeased as many feminists as Woolf's book has (and on rather similar grounds of class privilege and voluntarism – in addition to charges by the anti-pornography movement), it has also displeased the entertainment-motivated audiences who found their voyeuristic pleasure and standard subject-position severely undercut by the film's didactic project and women-centred sexual politics. The latter's articulation, evident to everyone at the thematic, manifest level, was much less evident, but perhaps all the more effective, at the level of spectatorship – in the inversion of the function of address and of the system of the look that characterize dominant or mainstream cinema, and that have come to be expected by its spectators.

While *Working Girls* doesn't work as mainstream cinema (that is to say, crudely put, the male spectators are not turned on by it), it also may not work effectively as women's cinema. By this I mean, quite plainly, that women spectators may not be turned on either. This is not, I think, because the film is about sex work (with the emphasis on work rather than sex), but because it is devoid or, more accurately, purged of desire. Paradoxically, in a film that manifestly supports sex work as a viable economic option for women's social and emotional independence from men (as signified by the opening and closing shots of Molly's lesbian household), sex work appears to be the ultimate form of alienated labour, for all the control it may afford the workers, and in spite of the film's effective de-romanticizing and de-moralizing of female sexuality. In other words, it is not that *Working Girls* is 'unaestheticized', as some critics have alleged of *Born in Flames*, but rather that it is *anaesthetized*: it is as dry, distant, and neutral as the latex sex it mercilessly depicts, finally representing sex work as the negation, not of sex but of female desire itself.

I will now try to say this more complexly. Writing about *Born in Flames* and other films, in 'Rethinking Women's Cinema', I proposed and elaborated the theoretical hypothesis that a film could *address the spectator as female*, a female social subject engendered, constructed, and defined by *multiple* social relations (of class, race, sexuality, age, etc.), and that such a film's textual space would extend toward this spectator 'in its erotic and critical dimensions, addressing, speaking-to, making room, but not . . . cajoling, soliciting, seducing'.¹¹ This notion of address, it seemed to me, was a more useful criterion by which to define women's cinema as a cinema by and for women. And, as the reception of *Working Girls* suggests, both the critical and the erotic dimensions seem to be necessary: lacking the former, the film would offer no critique of representation, cinema or society, and so lose its connection to feminism; lacking the latter, it would remain didactic, fail to engage the spectator's desire, and so relinquish its capacity for 'entertainment'.

11 Scott MacDonald. Interview with Lizzie Borden. *Feminist Studies* vol. 15, no. 2 [Summer 1989] p. 342.

The importance of narrative cinema as a mode of working through the relations of female subjectivity, identity and desire cannot be understated. It has been perhaps the single uncontested issue in women's cinema, as well as feminist cultural politics, since the late Claire Johnston's often cited remark in 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema': 'In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film.'¹² Pleasure, fantasy, and desire have indeed become central to the feminist project of both inventing new images of the female social subject and imaging for that subject new forms of community. One of the effects of that project, less in cinema than elsewhere, has been the construction of conceptual, representational, and erotic spaces where women could address themselves to women and, in assuming the position of subject – of speaking, seeing, thinking, and desiring subject – women could then concurrently identify and recognize in women *the subjects and the objects* of a female desire.

There is no doubt that feminism shares with other emergent and oppositional social groups the affirmation and the reclaiming of sociosexual differences, and the project of creating alternative ways of seeing, conceptualizing, and representing difference. But the particularity of the feminist project consists in its specific emphasis on the female subject in all of its component aspects – from the modes of its social and material subjection to the modes of its resistance and agency, from the emergent conditions of female symbolic subjecthood to the affective and unconscious processes that mark female historical subjectivities, and hence the necessary emphasis, for feminism here and now, on a critical, historicized understanding not only of the possibilities but also of the limitations of fantasy, desire, and what Audre Lorde has called 'the uses of the erotic.'¹³ In cinema, video, and other social technologies or 'machines' of the visible, this is especially crucial, given their now acknowledged weight in the processes of subjectivity and in the construction of self- or group-identity, as evidenced by the popular terms that signify those processes: self-image, representation, (in)visibility, passing, and so on.

Going back to the notion of alternative cinema, I would propose that, even though we can no longer equate it either with experimental/avant-garde filmmaking or with what used to be called 'political' cinema (i.e., independent or 'poor' cinema), in opposition to the monolithic machine of Hollywood and other national cinemas, and even though we can no longer think of it as a cinema of liberation in the terms set out by Solanas and Getino, nevertheless their notion of a guerrilla cinema retains some valuable suggestions.

¹² Claire Johnston 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' in *Notes on Women's Cinema* ed. Claire Johnston (London: SEFT, 1974), p. 31

¹³ Audre Lorde *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984)

Take, for example, their idea of alternative venues of distribution, such as screenings in community centres and non-commercial, educational spaces for a limited, local audience, where the film would act as 'a detonator or pretext' for critical exchange and discussion, bringing about a sort of 'liberated space, a decolonized territory' (p. 9) The presence of the filmmaker and/or actors at the screening and subsequent discussion, as well as the film shown, they hoped, would constitute an act of liberation from neocolonial oppression, an act of collective and individual decolonization, for all the actors-participants

The decolonization of the filmmaker and of films will be simultaneous acts to the extent that each contributes to collective decolonization The battle begins without, against the enemy who attacks us, but also within, against the ideas and models of the enemy to be found inside each one of us. Destruction and construction. (p. 10)

I need not underscore the parallels between this view and the practices of independent or 'political' cinema in the US (and Britain) in the 70s, practices which have virtually disappeared by the late 80s What is more remarkable is that something of that notion of guerrilla cinema has continued to be active throughout the 80s in the actual reception, if not in the deliberate strategies, of women's cinema, and this has occurred in spite of the inevitable adjustments due to the historical factors that, paradoxically, have contributed to the success of women's cinema, such as the institutionalization of feminism in academic Women's Studies programmes, festivals, and publicly funded events, and consequently the rather celebratory character of such events. Just two examples – the presentation of *Working Girls* in Santa Cruz mentioned earlier; and the heated debate that ensued from the women-only screening of Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) at the London Metro Cinema in September 1988, when some women stormed the screen while others tried to rip the film from the projector – suggest that women's cinema can still work as something of a decolonial practice, a transformation or variation of feminist consciousness-raising practices, though we can no longer cherish the hope for an unambiguous 'liberation'.¹⁴

Thus the notion of guerrilla film is still valid, it seems to me, when it refers to an alternative practice of cinema emanating from and explicitly located in a subcultural context, or a marginal sector of a socially emergent group such as 'women' What I have in mind is not so much the sense in which the collective reading of any film (including a commercial, box-office oriented, patently heterosexual film like *Personal Best* [Towne, 1982])¹⁵ depends not insignificantly on the context of exhibition and reception, which may well constitute the film as a 'pretext' for critical discussion (as in a

¹⁴ One account of the debate provoked by McLaughlin's film is given by Victoria Brownworth, 'Dyke S/M Wars Rage in London: Racism and Fascism Alleged' *Coming Up!* vol. 10, no. 1 (October 1988), pp. 14–15. On what has come to be known generally as the feminist sex wars, see B. Ruby Rich, 'Feminism and Sexuality in the 1980s' *Feminist Studies* vol. 12, no. 3 (1986), pp. 525–561.

¹⁵ On the different readings of *Personal Best* and the specific interpretive strategies documented in lesbian feminist reviews, see Elizabeth Ellsworth, 'Illicit Pleasure: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*' *Wide Angle* vol. 8, no. 2 (1986), pp. 45–56.

college classroom) or a 'detonator' of audience response (as in a rally) I am rather thinking of guerrilla cinema in the sense of those films which can disrupt, shake up, put into question the given group's imaginary self-coherence, bringing to the surface and giving voice to the repressed, unavowed differences and exclusions on which the ideology of a self-complacent, international or multicultural feminism has come to rest. And in this sense, especially, I have used the phrase 'guerrilla in the midst', in conjunction with Tania Modleski's reading of *Gorillas in the Mist* (Michael Apted, 1988) in her paper 'Cinema and the Dark Continent: Race and Gender in Popular Film', also presented at the 'High Culture/Popular Culture' conference

In sum, what I would call alternative films in women's cinema are those which engage the current problems, the real issues, the things actually at stake in feminist communities on a local scale, and which, although informed by a global perspective, do not assume or aim at a universal, multinational audience, but address a particular one in its specific history of struggles and emergency. Films, in other words, whose project is less the imaging of a redemptive history (as might have been conceived in the early years of the women's movement) than a project of 'effective' history, in Foucault's terms, but films which, nevertheless, manage 'to bring about a real state of emergency,' as Benjamin urged: 'to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to [those who are] singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.'¹⁶

That the 80s are a moment of danger is not in doubt, with Thatcherism rampant in Britain and the recent presidential election in the U.S. following up on eight years of Reaganomics and the frightful increase in fundamentalism, racism, and homophobia fuelled by the AIDS national emergency. What is in doubt is whether progressive, or what I would rather call radical, feminism – I mean the feminism that since the early 80s has been engaged in anti-racist and anti-homophobic struggles, responsive to the critique of racism articulated by women of colour as well as to the lesbian critique of the institution of heterosexuality – will be able to avert the attendant dangers of feminist conservatism and aestheticized post-feminism, on the one hand, and of appropriation/expropriation by the media, on the other. In short, whether feminism will be able to deflect the strategies of legitimation and delegitimation of sociosexual difference that have become prevalent in this decade. For, as Norma Alarcón put it to me in a seminar discussion, are there really any 'inappropriated others'? I took her question to mean that while there may be – indeed there are – many who are other (than white or socially privileged), insofar as they are named, interpellated, or represented as 'others', they may already have

16 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) p. 257

been appropriated. The question of an *alternative* women's cinema today must be posed precisely from this historical and political emergency.

To illustrate the point, I want to look very briefly at some strategies of inscription, legitimation and delegitimation of sociosexual difference exemplified in three recent woman's films (I use this term to retain the ambiguity rightly preferred by Mayne and to avoid labeling the films feminist or otherwise, which in the present argument would be tantamount to begging the question) Considering the overall production of films about women during the past few years, one is struck by the pervasiveness of certain 'themes' clearly derived from a generic, much oversimplified image of 'feminism' that may be openly antagonistic or apparently sympathetic, but is equally reductive and ultimately hostile to the feminist political project One is the theme of women's independence: women successful in their careers as well as in their personal and social lives, whom the film eventually punishes for their hubris and brings down to their 'proper' place by means of sexual subjugation by a man. Or not And in this second case, the woman 'wins'

Examples of the first case are *The Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985), where gender reversal in the courtroom drama genre only serves to accentuate that women are still first and foremost the locus of the sexual (for men), whatever else they may do or be, and thus will only be controlled by men through sexual domination; or *Extremities* (Robert Young, 1987), where one woman's successful struggle against her rapist only succeeds in realigning the audience's sympathies with the latter. A related theme is the more traditional one of female sexuality as excessive, uncontrollable, leading to murder for the sake of securing women's unbounded sexual 'freedom', as re-proposed in the resurgence of *film noir* remakes (*Body Heat* [Lawrence Kasdan, 1981], *Black Widow* [Bob Rafelson, 1987]) and variations thereof (*Fatal Attraction* [Adrian Lyne, 1987]) All of these are obviously antagonistic, anti-feminist attempts to devalue the gains that a *very few* women may have made in social equality and, at a deeper level, to delegitimize the feminist demand for women's self-definition and sexual independence from familial- or male-centered social relations

In the second case, where the woman wins, a quite new and increasingly recurrent theme makes its appearance: the theme of lesbianism It seems that one requirement of the sentimental education that accompanies the woman's journey to independence is her encounter with the sphinx of lesbianism; and our heroine will survive it, by answering the riddle much in the same way as Oedipus did *i.e.*, on behalf of man. Films like *She's Gotta Have It*, *Bagdad*

Cafe (Percy Adlon, 1988), *The Color Purple*, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1984), or *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* are apparently benign and seemingly pro-feminist ways of achieving a similar effect: that is to say, while they ostensibly legitimate women's ability to succeed in the world as it is, and even to live independently of 'men', these films, in their more or less overt homophobia, all but delegitimize the feminist argument for an autonomous definition of female sexuality and the far more radical independence from the heterosexual social contract – the social institution and the symbolic categories of heterosexuality.

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing, for example, 'starts from the premise that women can do anything they want in life', states its young director, the Canadian Patricia Rozema, winner of the 1987 Cannes Prix de la Jeunesse for her enormously successful first feature produced independently (in Toronto) on a shoestring, as the saying goes, and sold to 32 countries in one week.¹⁷ Like the media accounts of its production, the film is a modern-day fairytale. It tells the story of Polly, a modern-day Cinderella with a camera and aspirations to art-photography, who gets a secretary job in an art gallery and a crush on its curator, Gabrielle, a glamorous and successful lesbian in the closet. But the unlikely Prince Charming, as Polly(anna) will discover, is not only a pretentious art critic, unappreciative of true talent (Polly's), but also a fake who passes off her girlfriend's painting for her own. In short, Gabrielle is at once a female man and a bad phallic mother, and Polly will expose her crime, her secret lack, by extorting her confession on video camera.

It is difficult to see what lesbianism has to do with this story, which features it so prominently in theme (and so stereotypically in characterization), except perhaps to take the place of 'the kind of action or violence or sex that get automatic attention and commercial success' – the kind, that is, which Rozema decries (and which would have cost more than a few shoestrings). Rozema builds her film, as well as her account of its project, on the sparest, most tenuous presumption of feminist principles: 'Women and ambition is a fairly new issue, and one that interests me, so I chose to work primarily with female characters. Men don't really have much of a presence in this film – as women have so often not had much presence in film generally.' But she worries that 'one could interpret the film as anti-male' or that it might have been seen as 'propaganda for homosexuality'. Consequently, one may speculate, her 31-year-old heroine Polly is intended to be 'an asexual, polymorphous-perverse "everywoman"' – no matter that the two adjectives are mutually incompatible, that the subjectivity they would describe is unimaginable, and that such a privileged and omnipotent universal female subject is, at best, improbable. Rozema continues: 'The curator could have been a man, or a straight woman, but the fact that she is a lesbian is meant to blow Polly's [and the viewer's?]

17 Chris Bearchell 'A Canadian Fairytale: Chris Bearchell Talks to Patricia Rozema about Taking her First Feature to Cannes' *Epicene* (October 1987), p. 26. All subsequent quotations from Rozema come from this text (pp. 24–26) which combines the interview with Bearchell's generous if rightly critical review of the film.

mind. And if Gabrielle had been a man, it might have been a film that was anti-male-authority. As it is, it's simply anti-authority'. So much for sexual difference. As for gender, it 'seems like a category of such minuscule significance to me. . . . I'm interested in more existential questions', Rozema states.

I quoted at some length to point out the conscious strategies, on the part of the director, by which both feminism and lesbianism are on the one hand appropriated and legitimated, and on the other preempted of their sociopolitical and subjective power, reduced to a new angle to sell 'more existential questions'. These, one must infer, are the heroine's fantasies of flying or walking on water(!). For the fantasy sequences are shot in black and white, clearly marked as 'art' photography, in order to set off Polly's 'internal universe' from the 'realistic' colour footage of the mundane 'real world', which Bearchell accurately characterizes as a lesbian soap opera. I do not care to speculate further on the less conscious or unexpressed fantasies behind *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (the reference to T. S. Eliot is no less a naïf than the rest of the film), though its reception as an exemplary film of women's cinema is ground for serious self-questioning by those of us who still want to claim the term for a feminist political project.

Bob Rafelson's *Black Widow* is a more interesting film with regard to this discussion, and not because of the existential questions which it doesn't pose, but rather because it exemplifies both cases at once, both of the narrative images and trajectories typical of the heroine of the woman's film in the age of post-feminism: the independent woman who is found guilty and punished, and the woman who wins (and punishes) are placed face to face in the lead *film noir* roles of the *femme fatale* and the female investigator. Catherine (played by Theresa Russell) is the elusive, super-sexy, murderous spider woman, *noir* icon par excellence, and Alex (played by Debra Winger) is the supposedly unattractive, unwomanly woman-detective who turns down dates with her boss for a smoky game of poker with the boys.

If both can be called heroines and if *Black Widow* just barely qualifies as a woman's film, in spite of its being obviously made in the *film noir* genre, it is because Alex is not really the hero, although she occupies his narrative function as agent, representative of the law and eventual purveyor of justice. She does bear the name of the Father, duly foreshortened (Alex is the masculine-sounding short for Alexandra), and yet her relation to the very icon of the object of desire, her 'obsession' with Catherine – an obsession which the genre codes as a relation of desire (to wit the title of Visconti's superb version of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Ossessione* [1942]) – is subverted by the unexpected emergence, half-way through the film, of the most classic femininity in Alex's own character and visual image. In other words, what the

spectator had been led to read as Alex's desire for Catherine, culminating in the scene on the beach and the famous kiss at the wedding party, suddenly and inexplicably twists into a feminine identification with her, the kind of identification with the female image, the Mother, which, according to Freud, allows the girl to negotiate the Oedipus Complex and turn her instinctual drives toward the man: Alex starts wearing Catherine's clothes, visiting her hair stylist, and wanting to sleep with her husband (-to-be)

In her reading of *Black Widow*, Marina Heung makes a good argument for the film's attempt to transform the role of women in the *noir* genre by assigning both of the lead roles to independent and professional women, and thus having 'two women protagonists interact directly with each other' in a genre whose 'usual strategy is to pose the "good" woman and the "bad" woman as symbolic opposites, abstractions emblematic of the male protagonist's moral conflict' ¹⁸ However, Heung concludes, the attempt is unsuccessful: it is only Alex's fascination with Catherine that sustains the plot and is given a plausible, if questionable, explanation (i.e. Alex takes Catherine as alter ego, as model to her own inadequate femininity), the 'black widow' remains mysterious, unknowable, so that the mere hint of her attraction to Alex must suffice to raise the spectatorial stakes in a possible erotic relationship between the two women. Thus, to Heung's way of seeing, the film develops two plots: the classical *noir* plot and the 'feminization of Alex' plot, ultimately disappointing all expectations.

My own reading is less kind to the film. What Heung calls the second plot is not in fact a plot – at least not in the sense of an arrangement of narrative functions, though it may well be a plot in the sense of intentional strategy – but rather an inconsistent subtext borrowed from the genre of the woman's film, and temporarily inserted in the film in order for the first (*noir*) plot to achieve its climax and moral (oedipal) resolution. Similar contortions are required in Freud's account of the female psychosexual development, where an additional twist is required in the oedipal plot (the girl's sudden refocusing of sexual pleasure from the clitoris onto the vagina) to turn her infantile object-choice from the Mother to the Father, and every deviation from this pattern is attributed to a 'bisexuality' innate to all humans, but more so to females ¹⁹ In the film's plot, that twist takes the form of Alex's sudden feminine identification with Catherine. But its inherent inconsistency is apparent once again in the final coup-de-scène where Alex is fully reinstated in her role as punishing representative of the Law and walks away alone, in the closing shot, into an uncertain sunset. This is not the ending of a woman's film, but of a *film noir* (or a detective film, a western, etc.): Alex's 'feminization' has not occurred, the 'second plot' has simply been dropped, the inconsistency remains.

¹⁸ Marina Heung, *Black Widow*, *Film Quarterly* vol. 41 no. 1 (Fall 1987), p. 57.

¹⁹ On the Freudian story of femininity as well as on the standard positions assigned to male and female characters by the plot of oedipal narratives in film and elsewhere I have written extensively in *Alice Doesn't*, ch. 5.

A piece of indirect evidence for this argument may be found in another film, Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, which is similarly built on two female protagonists and a plot which also turns on the investigation of one by the other. But there the relationship of the suburban child-housewife of uncertain femininity, played by Rosanna Arquette, to the mysterious and sexually 'free' superwoman played by Madonna, is clearly one of feminine, narcissistic identification. Consistently with the generic plot of the woman's film, in the end femininity, independence and even friendship are achieved, but with, heaven forbid, no hanky panky between girls and, instead, the restoration to each of her own man. In spite of that, this film, too, in the wake of the current vogue of the theme of lesbianism, has been read as being about 'feminine desire' (collapsed into feminine identification), and has been seen ingenuously – or perhaps ingeniously – as catering to 'the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship' ²⁰

Going back to *Black Widow*, then, it clearly appears that, the greater sophistication of its apparatus notwithstanding, the film's heavy hints at lesbianism are also there only to 'blow the viewer's mind', and its Hollywood-scale strategy of expropriation and delegitimation is, for the greater visual pleasure it affords, all the more insidious. Imagine for a moment if Alex had been allowed to be what the first half of the film suggests – that is, the subject of her female desire for Catherine – she would not have wanted *to be like* Catherine but *to have her*, or have *her* instead of *Paul*; and she, most likely, *might* have had her – and then, good-bye poker games and target practice with the boys, good-bye service to the Law protecting rich men from women, good-bye loyalty to their moral order. . . Will someone ever remake *film noir* this way?

Like the other two, the third film in my sample, McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things*, is set in an investigative frame whose subject is the heroine and whose object, the 'mystery' investigated, is also 'woman' – female sexuality, difference, and desire. Where it differs from them is in its employ of cinematic narrative codes such as the film-within-the-film, parallel editing, and the system of the look (which maps the relations of look and image) to construct spectatorial positions, as well as diegetic points of view, whereby both of the protagonists are perceived to be at once subject and object of a female desire. And where it differs from nearly all other cinematic representations of lesbianism is the way this film proposes it precisely as *a question of representation, of what can be seen*. Here lesbianism is not merely a theme or a subtext of the film, nor simply a content to be represented or 'portrayed', but is the very problem of its form: how to represent a female, lesbian desire that is neither masculine, a usurpation of male heterosexual desire, nor a feminine, narcissistic identification with the other woman. Which is to say how to construct, for both spectators and filmmakers, a new position

²⁰ Jackie Stacey 'Desperately Seeking Difference', *Screen* vol 28 no 1 (Winter 1987) pp 48–61

of seeing, a new place of the look, the place of a woman who desires another woman.

She Must Be Seeing Things is not simply the portrayal of a lesbian relationship and of the ghosts and fantasies that haunt the two protagonists (one of whom is an independent filmmaker). It is also, quite self-consciously and originally, an attempt to pose the formal problem of lesbian representation in cinema by working through the cinematic equivalence of look and desire, and to reclaim the function of voyeurism by rearticulating it in lesbian terms.²¹ 'What I wanted to do in this film was to foreground the relationship between the two women and then have that act in relation to male culture. . . . I wanted to open up the notions and possibilities of what women can do, to try to confront and be iconoclastic towards what have become lesbian and feminist taboos. . . . I wanted to undermine the idea of women as narcissistic extensions of each other because I don't think it's true. That's not why women are together', McLaughlin stated in response to the charges of pornography and heterosexism some lesbian feminists hurled at her film.²² Indeed, the erotic relationship between the two protagonists is represented as mediated by heterosexual codes and ways of seeing that are inescapable in our culture, but also by other, subcultural codes (e.g., the lesbian butch-femme performance of sexual roles), which the film foregrounds visibly, marking them as roles, as performance, and distancing them by irony.

By calling up the iconographic and cultural forms that recur in the history of cinema and constitute the frame of reference for the visible, for what can be seen, but doing so in conjunction with contemporary lesbian practices of both reappropriation and deconstruction of that history, *She Must Be Seeing Things* confronts the spectator with a necessary if uncomfortable question: What are

²¹ This last point is also made by Martha Gever, 'Girl Crazy: Lesbian Narratives in *She Must Be Seeing Things* and *Damned If You Don't*', *The Independent* (July 1988), pp. 14–18.

²² Alison Butler, *She Must Be Seeing Things: An interview with Sheila McLaughlin*, *Screen* vol. 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1987), pp. 21–22.



She Must Be Seeing Things
(Courtesy of Metro Pictures)

She Must Be Seeing Things
(Courtesy of
Sheila McLaughlin)



the things Agatha (Sheila Dabney) imagines seeing and those Jo (Lois Weaver) 'sees' in her film, if not those very images that our cultural imaginary and the whole history of cinema have constructed as the visible, what can be seen, and eroticized? Namely, the female body displayed as spectacle for the male gaze 'to take it in', to enter or possess it, or as fetish object of his secret identification; the woman as mystery to be pursued, investigated, found guilty or redeemed (by man); and above all, what can be seen and eroticized – though it is not actually represented on the screen, but only figured, implied, in the look – the male gaze itself, the phallic power of the look as figure and signifier of desire.

Feminist film criticism and theory have documented this history of representation extensively. The originality of McLaughlin's film, in my opinion, consists precisely in foregrounding that frame of reference, making *it* visible, and at the same time shifting it, moving it aside, as it were, enough to let us see through the gap, the contradiction; enough to create a space for questioning not only what they, the two women protagonists, see but also what we, spectators, see in the film; enough *to let us see ourselves seeing*, and with what eyes. Thus it addresses spectatorial desire precisely by disallowing a univocal identification with any one character or role or object-choice, and foregrounding instead the relations of desire to fantasy and its mobility, for them and for us, within the fantasy scenario.

In contrast to the romance or fairy-tale formulas adopted by films like *Lianna* (John Sayles, 1983), *Desert Hearts*, or *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *She Must Be Seeing Things* locates itself historically and politically in the contemporary North American lesbian community with its conflicting discourses, posing the question of desire and its representation from within the context of

actual practices of both lesbianism and cinema. As a self-conscious, self-critical, feminist intervention amidst the various representational strategies, both feminist and anti-feminist, that aim to expropriate and delegitimize lesbianism as irreducible sociosexual difference, or to recontain it in acceptable, legitimate forms, McLaughlin's film is an example of how an alternative, guerrilla cinema can still work effectively today

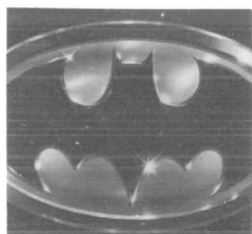
Ballots, bullets, or Batman: can cultural studies do the right thing?

ANDREW ROSS

'The mood of this country has changed from that of *Easy Rider* to that of *Dirty Harry*.' George Bush, on the 1988 campaign trail.

'We came to this country in different ships, but we're both in the same boat now.' Jesse Jackson, to Michael Dukakis, at the Democratic Convention, in Atlanta, 1988.

THE summer of 1989 in the United States wasn't particularly long or hot, although the mean temperature of many citizens was raised by thoughts of exercising recently reaffirmed constitutional rights by burning the Stars and Stripes. Other national insignia, however, less resonant than Old Glory, competed for meaning in city streets. Prominent among these icons was the ubiquitous BatmanTM logo, almost an alternate corporate logo for the swelling Warner Communications group. It began to prevail over the advance-guard of downtown bohemian clothing style in the early spring, and then exploded across transnational billboard space when Warners' blockbuster film opened globally: 'making history', as a late ad put it, 'around the world.'



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Less brazen but more portable were the Africa insignia and accessories worn increasingly by black American youth. Many of the young bearers of the African-American colours may not know their conventional meanings (in one version: red, for the blood shed by Africans and African-Americans; black, for their colour, or gold, for their cultural and economic wealth; and green, for the richness of their land), and even fewer are likely to be versed in the political history of black nationalism called up by the Africa pendants they

(Courtesy of CBS Records)



PUBLIC ENEMY

wear. But the sense of strength and solidarity suggested by the image of a mighty continent is seen as a symbol of empowerment by those black Americans whose hopes for a liveable future have been criminally reduced to their lowest point in modern times during the Reagan-Bush years. At the end of the summer, when white racial violence broke out of its contained categories to provide an occasion for anguished liberal press copy and renewed black anger, it became quite clear that the most likely symbol all along had been Public Enemy's logo of a black youth caught in the cross-hairs of a (white) sniper's rifle lens.

In this respect, Public Enemy's logo can be seen as the graphically interpretative link between the relatively abstract presences of the Batman and Africa designs. On the one hand, the bat totem, visually established in modern Euro-Western cultural iconography as the vampiric defense of white, aristocratic blood: historically tied, then, to protecting a hereditary order against miscegenation, social and biological, and reinterpreted in the interests of American Gothic, with its celebratory Protestant fantasy of white vigilante justice sweeping the fetid air, masked and invincibly righteous. On the other hand, the Africa symbol of an imaginary blood-based unity, pre-existing the diaspora generated by Western greed and racism; but also a colourful record of the pride of African-American cultural communities across the bicontinental geographical spectrum that runs from Patagonia in the South to Nova Scotia in the North.

Right now, in the U.S. at least, it is hardly surprising, though far from inevitable, that the cultural face-off between these two symbols of racial accountability would result in the everyday reality that black bodies in the streets are always a potential white target for racist aggression. After all, the semiotic contest that I have constructed between these logos takes place against a backdrop of racial retrenchment, with civil rights everywhere eroded, with growing public awareness about what is meant, in economic and social terms, by the 'genocide' of the black underclass – life expectancy rates, for example, have declined for two years running – and with the government's official silence about race relations interpreted all too eloquently by the flourishing white supremacist groups, by the growing racism on college campuses, by the highly visible state of police brutality, and by the toll of racial killings in

the streets of white 'ethnic' neighborhoods like Howard Beach and Bensonhurst (to cite only the most publicized recent incidents)

There is no *direct link* between the sedimented cultural meanings of the Batman/Africa symbols and the stark reality of everyday racial conflict. But cultural studies, insofar as its disciplinary methods can be characterized, is nonetheless responsible for pursuing a certain kind of knowledge about the indirect determinacy between cultural texts and social events or discourses, preferring it over critical rules like that of textual (in)determinacy, which take the formal work of representation itself as the central motif and motive of social action. The task of cultural studies is to know something about the links between social formations and cultural symbols-in-action, and to show how and to what extent textual mediation between the two is both continuous and, to some extent, transforming – especially where the socializing links are made, in cases like the Batman-Africa logos, by the logics of the entertainment industry, on the one hand, and youth subcultures, on the other. More important, however, than close attention to this process is the increasing need, within cultural studies, to see the common ground between seemingly disparate cultural practices which speak, respectively, from the centre and the margin; in this particular case, to see the Batman/Africa logos, along with the social events, discourses and histories which surround them, *side by side*, as parts of a dialectical expression of the problems inherent in any symbolic expression of national identity.

As cultural studies moves its traditional focus away from the conflict between dominant and popular cultures, conceived as unified blocs, and turns its attention to the axis between central and marginal cultures, conceived as pluralities, the unfortunate tendency (fully fledged at one end of the discipline) to celebrate the 'authenticity' of resistant ethnic cultures will surely surface, again at the expense of a more dialectical analysis. As I have argued elsewhere about the historically fraught relationship between intellectuals and popular culture, the histories of official and subordinate cultures, so deeply implicated in each other, have to be written together.¹ So too, the stories summoned up by, say, the Batman and the African logos are two constantly updated versions, from the centre and the margin respectively, of a history that won't stand still. Each story needs to know a good deal about the other in order to win itself a public hearing.

It may be banal to point out that the challenge of a properly multicultural society calls out for this kind of dialectical knowledge and analysis; but nothing could be more important, right now, to the multicultural programme of American cultural studies, even as the rough beast of this hemisphere slouches towards 1992, a year when the quinqucentenary celebrations of European 'contact' will provide,

¹ Andrew Ross *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge 1989)

- 2 E D Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1987), and Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)
- 3 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)

among other less savoury spectacles, the occasion for contesting the meaning of 'America' – not just for the U.S., but for the Americas as a whole. Any attempt to carry through that programme will be up against the terms set in the current debate about 'national culture' generated by the work of E D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom.² As I will show later in this article, in a discussion of Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity*,³ there will be ample opportunities for liberal and neo-conservative framers of this debate to collapse, yet again, issues of race and ethnicity into the *consensus* model (governed by an East–West paradigm) that has dominated North American cultural studies since the Cold War. As the cultural effects of multinationalism move onto centre stage, and pan-Americanist consciousness (*America sin fronteras*) of the North–South paradigm is stepped up, the 'national culture' thesis will have to be contested in ways that go beyond the (consensual) liberal response: i.e., pointing to what gets officially left out, and what consequently needs to be included for a culture to be truly, and consensually, national. So too, we can expect these new paradigms to transform the coupled international stories told by the Batman and Africa logos about a mythical 'American' identity and a contestatory 'African-American' identity.

These are big questions, however, and cultural criticism is usually at its best when it modestly focuses on local examples. One of the places I have chosen to begin is to recognize the vexed but dialectical exchange between the two summer films which, in many ways, crystallized the current state of U.S. ethnic and racial conflict: Warners' *Batman* (Burton, 1989), a film where the racial problematic is highly coded to the point of public invisibility, and Universal's *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989), in which the racial problematic was posed to a point of utter visibility. *Batman*, an expensive transnational product, launched by a publicity campaign unmatched in entertainment history, was directed by Hollywood's new 'creative' white Wunderkind, Tim Burton, fresh from the innovative successes of the offbeat suburban fantasies, *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1988). *Do the Right Thing*, a 'local', communitarian production that struggled against Hollywood logic to retain its 'independent' feel and voice, was directed by Spike Lee, arguably the first black American filmmaker to define the structure and content of a Hollywood-financed film entirely on his own terms.

No two films, it would seem, could be more disparate at all levels. economic production and distribution, industrial legitimacy, genre, aesthetic, audience, political intention. Indeed, a dominant tendency in establishment film studies might reject in advance any common analysis of these films for reasons of genre alone. The aim of the analysis that follows is to cut across such disciplinary categories of analysis, and to describe the dialogue between these two films as it

might be heard within the immediate social context of current debates about national and ethnic identity.

What does the Joker want?

‘spiritual overthrow of the underclass’. Prince

The phenomenal economic event of the *Batman* production has been widely recognized, especially in the context of the announcement of the largest media merger – Time Warner Inc. – in capitalist history. The resulting sweep of Batmania through global media consciousness was so complete it almost seemed as if, in the summer of 1989, the Defense Department’s public unveiling of the new, bat-like B-2 Stealth bomber might be nothing more than a predatory extension of Time Warner Inc.’s newfound powers to publicize its product.

Aside from the commercial hoopla, and the scary recognition of a new level of transnational production, *Batman* was a film with a high ‘local’ specificity. Consider the transitions between its opening scenes. Behind the title credits, the camera creeps, dips and skates through the bowel-like spaces between the contours of the bat ancestral crest, tracing out a symbol that seems to be as old and universal as nature itself. The code of nature then gives way to the code of the social. Suddenly, we are in the frantic streets of Gotham City (designed by Anton Furst according to a not so fanciful model of urban development by which Manhattan’s tall buildings sprang up, after 1900, without any zoning laws: the skyscrapers are not then stepped back, but cantilever forwards, creating a vaulted-over, rather than walled in, Gothic brutalism – in short, the deregulated imaginary). In this first scene, the action, and, in many respects, the logic of the whole film, is being motivated by the spectacle of a ‘decent’ white Rockwellian family who cannot hail down a taxicab. Eventually, they give up, cross over to another avenue, and are mugged by low-lives. Enter the masked avenger, dispensing his rough justice. Cut to the code of the political. The next scene depicts the city mayor’s public introduction of Harvey Dent as the newly appointed, black police commissioner – a black commissioner who plays no further significant role in the film.

Now anyone who knows anything about urban life in the US, and especially New York City, knows that it is not decent white families who have trouble hailing cabs, everyone knows that it is black (predominantly male) citizens, no matter how bourgeois their appearance, who are faced with this everyday predicament. In selecting this incident, however, to suggest the degenerate state of city life, the film embarks on a narrative whose full range of affective identifications depends upon a wholly occluded racial

subtext. While the film may be committed to reclaiming the complex spirit of proto-noir crime that prevailed in the heyday of the Batman pulp stories, it cannot help but incorporate a veiled commentary on race relations in the late eighties.

But how indirect is this commentary when many of the elements for a simple allegorical reading of racism are so clearly present in the film? Take the character of the Joker, whose appearance and skin colour change so dramatically after an accident involving chemical substances. Subsequently, the Joker plays his role in *whiteface*, and sports an involuntary rictus grin that caricatures, along with his new, pathologically delirious personality, the old minstrel blackface routine of putting on a happy face. This lascivious, and ever-so-foppish dude, who terrorizes the populace by spiking commercial beauty products with skin altering substances, also speaks in rappish rhymes, and moves his body in a shapeless jive to the rhythms of Prince's soundtrack. In one marvellous set piece, he and his gang – truly barbarians battering at the gates of Western culture – invade the seemingly Flugelheim Museum of Art. They carry a large beatbox, and, to the accompaniment of what, in this context, is clearly 'jungle music', trash the famous paintings by performing graffiti art, complete with tags, all over their surfaces. Galvanized by the prospect of bringing Gotham City to its knees, the Joker is finally asked the question that is officially asked of all alien upstarts, including, most recently, the presidential candidate, Jesse Jackson – 'What do you want?' The Joker's response is immediate – 'My face on the one-dollar bill.' A straight trade, then, that plays upon the very worst of white fears: the Joker's ambiguously coloured face for that of the slave-owner George Washington.



The actor JACOB KOSOVE, who appears as a villainous character in the film, "Joker's" face of violence in the film. The actor's appearance in the film is a parody of the character of the Joker in the film. The actor's appearance in the film is a parody of the character of the Joker in the film. The actor's appearance in the film is a parody of the character of the Joker in the film.

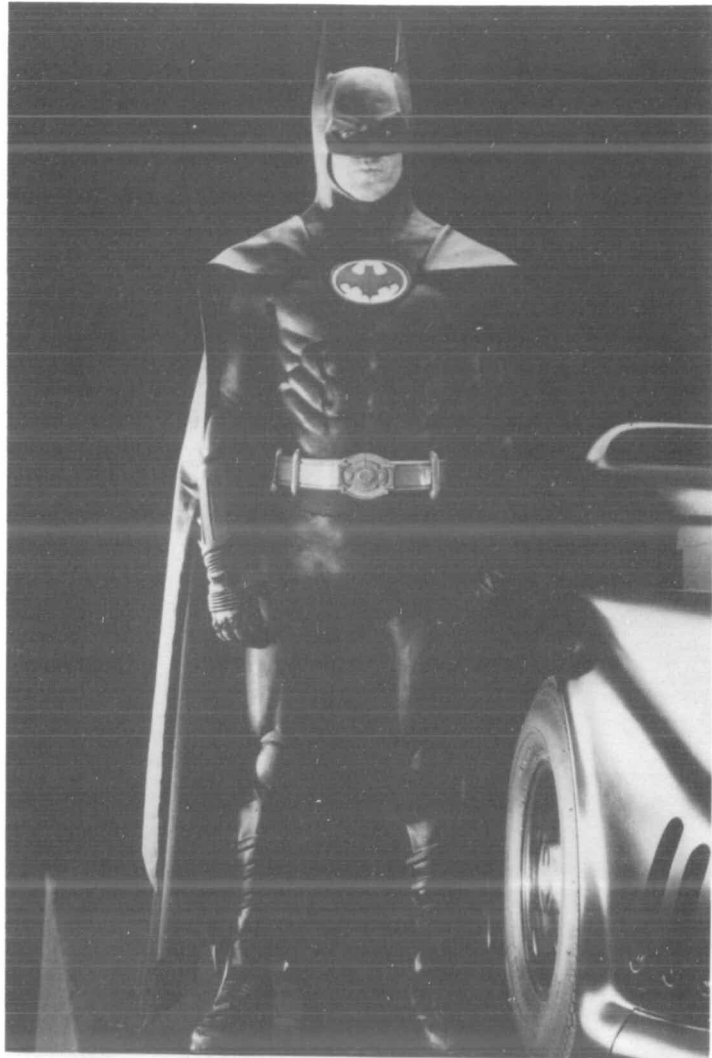
for postmodernity, have made a grand comeback in the eighties. The new adult make-over of the superheroes was partly a commercial response by DC and Marvel to the cross-generational appeal of the underground comics of the sixties, many of which had survived under the aegis of alternative or independent presses. Just as directly, however, the superhero revival was kindled by the desperate attempts, under Reagan, to reconstruct the institution of national heroism, more often than not in the form of white male rogue outlaws for whom the liberal solution of 'soft' state-regulated law enforcement was presented as having failed.

Under the cover of challenging the authority of official law enforcement, the new comics resurrect the practice of voluntarist law enforcement on the part of vigilantes at a time when the politics of the superhero tradition had long fallen into disfavour, and when advances in civil rights had stemmed the flow of 'white justice'. This revisionist move often makes for weird confusion among the new writers. Frank Miller, for example, who describes his Dark Knight as a 'mugged liberal', candidly admires Dirty Harry, whom, he observes, administers 'the "wrath of God" on murderers who society treats as victims.'⁵

The classic superheroes of the thirties and forties were unlicensed agents in a postlapsarian world of hedonism, crime and multiethnicity, a recurring fallen world that always has to be cleaned up, at least in terms of the evangelical Protestant tradition from whose crucible spring the revivalist moral reform movements that periodically visit the United States in waves of ugly righteousness. Miller, along with other writers in the comic book community today, accepts what they call the inherent 'fascism' of this history. Alan Moore's acclaimed *Watchmen* series, for example, self-consciously explores this history in a contemporary setting where right-wing opinion is trying to revive supervigilante figures who had gone into retirement to avoid being prosecuted for their activities. So too, in *Dark Knight*, the superheroes have all retired, with the exception of Superman, the big blue, preppy schoolboy, who has become Washington's running dog. Miller's Batman, his physical powers markedly slowed by age, is more human than ever, although still guided by his bad attitude in declaring holy war on all whom he perceives as 'criminals', an attitude governed by the rationality that his parents taught him – 'the world only makes sense if you force it to'.

Most relevant to the film which it influenced, however, was the racially-specific way in which *Dark Knight* treats the question of vigilanteism. The book presents a world of urban crime in which all the street gangs are extremist whites, identifiably right-wing and libertarian. The result, in terms of black representation, is invisibility. As in the Warner film, Miller's deviants, mutants, delinquents and psychopaths are exclusively white, while their

5 Frank Miller, in an interview with Kim Thompson, in Gary Groth and Robert Fiore (eds.), *The New Comics* (New York: Berkley Books, 1988), p. 66



MICHAEL KEATON plays the title role in Warner Bros.' epic action-adventure film "Batman," also starring Jack Nicholson as The Joker and Kim Basinger as photo-journalist Vicki Vale.

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BAT-014

depiction draws freely upon stereotypes about criminal and deviant behaviour that are usually applied to black and other minority subcultures. It is clear, to put it bluntly, that neither *Dark Knight* nor the film can afford to directly address the category of 'black crime' alongside their liberal critiques of police brutality, and still get away with what they do. Consequently, the uneasy liberal logic of these texts demands that the space that *would* be stereotypically allocated to blacks-as-criminals, and, more important, the alternative space that *could* be allocated, in a social realist text, to the complex subculture of black 'criminals', must somehow be filled by black

invisibility. The return of the 'black crime' repressed appears only once, and rather obliquely at that, in the graphic novel *Gotham's* mayor decides *not* to appoint a black police commissioner. 'blacks are passé', he opines, in what may be the most significant dialogue in the whole book.

Produced to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Batman, the Warners' film therefore recovers some of the historically noirish history of the myth at the expense of the criminal typing it romantically valorizes: on the one hand, the Italianate crime syndicate bosses, and, on the other, the 'black' criminal pathologies it constructs as a subtext in the ageing B-boy of a camp Joker. White America's mythologies about the vigilante cause of protective 'self-defence', problematically grasped in the figure of Batman, swerve away from what might be seen as their objective correlative today: lynchings and barbaric mutilations in the South that have resurfaced in the eighties, urban shootings like those of Bernhard Goetz, and the ever-vigilant threat of systematic police brutality, backed up by the toll of 'suicides' and 'asthma attacks' while in custody.

This swerve cannot, of course, be explained simply as a racist move. On the contrary, it must also be accounted for as the work of textual representation against the historical backdrop of meanings thrown up around the reign of black invisibility within Hollywood film. This is why the *Batman* story of 1989 demonstrates that the Hollywood camera's role in the perpetually racist saga of the 'rebirth of a nation' cannot be easily aligned with that other perspectival point of view – the view through the cross-hairs of a rifle lens. Neither lens is transparent. Just as the point of view in the Public Enemy logo is a reversible one – the silhouetted profile of its male victim means that his race is not finally fixed – so too the social uses of the Batman motif are in no way fixed. In fact, towards the end of the summer, leather medallions bearing the Batman symbol were also appearing around the necks of black youths.

The rights thing

'Elvis was a hero to most/ But he never meant shit to me/He's
straight-out racist/ That sucker was simple and plain/Motherfuck
him and John Wayne ' Public Enemy, 'Fight the Power'

To move from *Batman* to *Do the Right Thing* is to enter the realm of utter racial visibility. It was a film made from within and about a modern multiethnic community – African-American, Puerto Rican, Jamaican-American, Korean-American, Jewish-American, Irish-American and Italian-American. It was infused with a working knowledge of the history of black film and theatre, and presented as

A SPIKE LEE JOINT

DO THE RIGHT THING

(Courtesy of U.I.P.)

a strategic and timely attempt to address graphically the question of racism and police brutality. Its meaning was almost immediately inseparable from the social events that surrounded it. For example, the inflammatory career of Public Enemy during the summer of 1989 – whose anthemic ‘Fight the Power’ figures as a community refrain throughout the film – drew pickets at screenings of the film from the vigilante Jewish Defence Organisation (whose logo of a machine gun inside the Star of David was a dissonant match for Public Enemy’s own paramilitary posturing with Uzis in live performance). Within the ‘hip hop nation’, however, the more likely contender as musical accompaniment for the film was NWA’s ‘... Tha Police’ which initiated a new level of public harassment of the rap community. So too, the early hysteria of media and industry predictions about the film’s ‘incitement to [black] riot’, failed, predictably, to foresee a more probable occurrence in the form of the late August slaying of Yusuf Hawkins – another instance of white racist violence. (The slaying took place in Bensonhurst, the predominantly Italian-American community that is home, in the film, to Sal and his family.) And, in the light of its clearcut contribution to the election, in the fall, of New York City’s first black mayor (the filmmaker’s own publicly expressed intention), Lee’s film seemed to have become a properly social text which exploded the irony of *Dark Knight*’s sophisticated observation that ‘blacks are passé.’

Do the Right Thing starts where Lee’s last film, *School Daze* (1988), a bitter-sweet, carnivalesque critique of colour caste coding among black Americans, left off. *School Daze*’s agit-prop call to race-consciousness – ‘Wake Up!’ – is transformed, at the beginning of *Do The Right Thung*, into the community DJ’s more mundane, morning ‘wake-up call’ for Bed-Stuy residents on the hottest day of the summer. A concatenation of events will lead to a police slaying (in the tradition of Michael Stewart, Yvonne Smallwood, Eleanor Bumpers and many others), and the burning of white property in return for a black life. The mayor’s subsequent call, at the end of the film, for a police inquiry into the protection of property demonstrates the low public premium placed on black lives.

In the closely watched last scene of the film, Mookie, employed at the minimum wage as the pizza runner for the overpriced Sal’s Famous Pizzeria, demands to be ‘paid in full’ for services that

culminated in the destruction of Sal's property at his instigation. The demand is a deeply significant one in the historical light not only of underpayment for black employment but also of the African-American struggle for reparations for centuries of enslavement. But Lee, bluntly favouring social realism, does not romanticize the outcome: Mookie, unsure of future employment, simply needs the money. So too, the spectacle of white property in flames demands to be seen as a lesson in contrast to the legacy, from sixties' riots, of whole burned-out blocks in black neighborhoods. The only black property destroyed in the film has been Radio Raheem's massive beatbox, the incessant source of a culturally resistant voice that falls victim to Sal's Mickey Mantle baseball bat (the weapon of choice in many recent racial beatings). Raheem himself falls victim to the cops' infamous chokehold. In the end, it is the symbolically mute Smiley – in touch with the voice of the 'ancestors', Malcolm and Martin, through his Walkman tapes – who signals an ironic gain in black representation by pinning their picture on the scorched walls of the pizzeria above the charred images of Sinatra, De Niro, DiMaggio, Marciano, Como, Pavarotti, Minnelli, Cuomo, Pacino, Mancini, and Stallone.

What Lee presented, then, was a complex late eighties version of the 'fire next time'. Far from an instance of Malcolm X's justice of 'an eye for an eye', the burning of the pizzeria is the result of a multiple logic of events. It only makes sense within the full context of social relations that the film has explored through its cartoonish portrait of the economic underdevelopment of the community by white merchants and landlords, gentrifiers and their peace officers. In those last scenes of the film, Lee, again, makes no concessions to the codes of Hollywood heroism, although the riot does take on a celebratory feel. While the long historical significance, for black Americans, of race-related burnings is there to be invoked, and the spectacle of firemen turning hoses upon black figures is redolent of Southern scenes from the fifties and sixties, Lee's film avoids the liberal romance of 'History' – the romantic suggestion that 'History' will prove to be stronger than white benevolence. The culminating events in the film are all the result of human actions, with determinate human causes and consequences that are a little too Brechtian to take place in an ideal world.

It is likely that audiences (especially white audiences), immune to screen killings, would find the pizzeria riot to be the most gratuitous or incendiary scene, but the scandal of Raheem's homicide is by far the most important event. This event governs the logic of the film in ways that threaten to impoverish the phoney morality of always 'doing the right thing'. Nevertheless, the meaning of Lee's 'right thing' is held up as a serious issue. The phrase is spoken in the film by Da Mayor, an uncle tom character, who offers the nonchalant Mookie some paternal advice 'always do the right thing'.

Consequently, Mookie is given the role of stripping the phrase of its legacy of meanings for an older, and more obsequious, generation of black Americans, and of investing it, rather reluctantly in his case, with activist meaning (again, the irony of this move is available to all who know the history, as civil rights activists, of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, who play Da Mayor and Mother Sister). Almost immediately, the film's sobriquet entered everyday popular currency, and has since taken on a career of its own as a byword for responsibly militant action in a social order which has proved that it cannot be relied upon to face up to the full consequences of its multicultural identity without the applied pressure of such an imperative.

As a political imperative, the phrase – 'Do the right thing!' – is *not* a direct answer to the kind of question – 'What is to be done?', or, 'What does [Jesse Jackson] want?' – that is habitually posed by the voice of white power when it is forced to incorporate concessions to subaltern voices in order to reconstitute its hegemony. Unlike the Joker's direct answer to that question, Lee's 'do the right thing' is not a response in kind. At the very least, it reformulates the question and throws it back upon the questioner. At best, it redefines 'the problematic', in the Althusserian sense of the absolute or definite conditions of possibility under which answers are determined by the social paradigm from which certain questions are asked.

Nor, I think, does the phrase court the kind of liberal pluralism that might be invoked as 'doing what you think is right'. If Mookie does what he has to do, in the classic masculinist sense that rules his actions ('a man's gotta do. . .'), then it is a decision that is far from voluntarist, a decision that is determined by the urgency of social, cultural and historical realities that are alluded to, if not fully explicated in the tight economical structure of the film.

To select only one example of this, we might consider the film's exploration of the theme of generational respect, which is often cited, at least by liberal consensus thinkers, as a classic model of socio-cultural behaviour for immigrant groups in North American society. Earning 'respect' has been seen as a complex *rite de passage* for the second and third generations who complete the process of Americanist assimilation by transcending the simply materialistic aspiration of keeping body and soul together which was the restricted horizon of their first generation parents. Of course, this process is far from assimilationist if we consider that it is often the case that the third generation rediscovers the cultural identity of their family's ethnic origin which the second generation had taken so much trouble to reject as regressive. So too, it is easy to see that this model, even if taken seriously, is far from universal.

In Lee's film, Sal's Italian-American family unit presents a cleanly sketched picture of this classic model. The second generation parent

makes the feudal demand of his sons that they respect 'American' ideals – his constant refrain is 'This is America', and his pride is limited to his economic production as a purveyor of food. This demand is respectfully challenged by his sons' awareness of the consequential differences between cultural and ethnic identities. Pino is more belligerently Italianist than his father, while his darker skin places him nearer to the racist margin of insisting on an identity in no way proximate to that of black youths.⁶ The lighter-skinned Vito, on the other hand, has taken the symptomatic path of so many non-black ethnic youth in identifying with the cohesive, and often resistant, rituals of black youth subculture. A similar generational pattern (though, unfortunately, it is barely explored) can be seen in the home of Tina, Mookie's Puerto Rican girlfriend and mother of their child, whom the film designates as the extreme sexualized victim of its own codes of masculinist conflict and play.

Generational relations within the black community are, however, somewhat different. While they act out their function of providing paternalistic commentary for the youth, the ineffectual parental figures (there are no parents as such) like Mother Sister, Da Mayor and the Cornermen – ML, Coconut Sid, and Sweet Dick Willie – do not command the respect that is given by the more politically conscious youth to Malcolm and Martin, the real 'ancestors', or even to the roll call of black entertainers that is intoned by the DJ, Mister Señor Love Daddy. So too, Mookie's sister, Jade, openly derides her brother's lack of parental responsibility. Elsewhere in the film, she is allowed to voice a different, and more positive, kind of community activism which presents a challenge to the upfront virility-testing of the male youths. Unlike the militant Ella, who hangs with the B-boys, the 'grey' Jade is cast as a 'generic American', at a distance from Africanity. Caught, and implicated, in the masculinist crossfire across the racial and generational lines, Jade's plea for alternative forms of combatting racism is swallowed up by the events that follow, but it is there to be heard and remembered long after the film is over.

Nonetheless, with the egregious exception of the tom Mayor (who stands in for the disappointing careers of so many 'real' black American mayors) and the spiritually removed DJ, the whole community, youths *and* elders, men *and* women, commit themselves to the riot at the end of the film. This unity can be seen as the response of a class-conscious community to the kind of aggressive siege that it knows all too well. It can also be seen as the response of a community which also knows that its generational dynamics are still not accepted as a legitimate example of the official model of generational assimilation.⁷

As we can see, then, the imperative of 'doing the right thing' is played out differently across race, class, gender, age and ethnicity, and is determined by histories that are far from universal. In this

6 See Richard Edson's comments in Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster 1989), pp. 64–65 (insert).

7 What increasingly looks like an official conspiratorial policy (which of course does not need to be proved for its victims to feel the effects) is usually mediated by the strange public legacy of the thesis advanced in the infamous Moynihan Report of 1964 about the deteriorated matriarchal black family as an explanation for the disadvantaged position of black Americans. See *Scapegoating the Black Family: Black Women Speak*, a special issue of *The Nation* 249,4 (July 24/31, 1989).



DO THE RIGHT THING

Spike Lee, John Savage.

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respect, the strategic brilliance of the film lies in its demand for another national 'minority' – Italian-Americans – to take up a position as white petty-bourgeois and as exploiters of black working-class people. This means that no 'neutral' white ethnic pole exists in the film, against which to construct an 'Other'. In a national culture which is so heavily characterized by ethnic pluralism, it is astonishing that Lee's film should be so exceptional in this respect. Hollywood film has long addressed this problem by promoting Euro 'ethnic' types to its heroic white core. In fact, the appearance and impact of *Do the Right Thing* signals a challenge to the reign of Italian-American figures as the favoured, semi-integrated ethnic presence in Hollywood film which brought De Niro, Pacino, Travolta and Stallone (along with Coppola, De Palma and Scorsese) to the iconic forefront of the national cinema.

More important yet, Sal is forced to recognize what it means to run what he calls 'a respectable business' in his America, i.e. always at the exploited expense of others. The result is an absence of any clearcut or reductionist picture of racial conflict of the sort that is comfortably valorized in white liberal films which address the topic of race relations. The real effects of 'race' and 'ethnicity', those notoriously loose categories of power, are not simply disavowed or deconstructed. On the contrary, the consequences of these categories, for which white audiences are asked to take primary responsibility, are shown as being played out in *class-specific environments which deny the possible exercise of human and social rights just as radically as the categories of 'race' and 'ethnicity' obstruct the democratic pursuit of civil rights.*

America sin fronteras

'Central America . . . is so close – San Salvador is closer to Houston than Houston is to Washington D C.. Central America is America ' Ronald Reagan

Batman and *Do the Right Thing*, as I have discussed them here, present two extreme horizons of North American cultural production. So divergent are these horizons that they almost belong to different *nations* of discourse, separate and unequal, and yet their respective treatment of national mythologies and social realities demand that they be assessed together on the common ground that is the socialized site of their reception. Besides, the seamless mythological history that *Batman* reaffirms is the history that *Do the Right Thing* needs to know in order to challenge the mythical assumptions that support the official story of a 'national culture'. By that same token, the social narrative recounted by *Batman* needs to incorporate its occluded parables about race into a constantly updated and revised version in order to make its story stick, at least for those spectators of both films, who have been persuaded, in some way, that Lee's film is also doing the right thing. If film studies wants to be able to explain how two films like these *become* socially interactive then it cannot afford to confine itself to the formal analysis of modes of representation and their theoretical effectivity in the singular 'world' of either of the texts alone. Lee's film was *intended* to have as much political impact in the world as possible, Burton's as little as possible. But the social events that surrounded the reception of the films bore these intentions out in a national context in which the figure of the white vigilante and the picture of a black community under siege cannot help but be seen in dialogue.

To follow out the consequences of this discussion would take us, as I argued at the beginning of this article, into the larger framework of the current debates about a 'national culture'. The official debate has been widely and publicly aired around the attempts by E.D Hirsch and Allan Bloom to purify the culture, while the other, multicultural side of the story is being told, not only in struggles over the shape and contents of college curricula, but also in such areas as the campaign for bilingualism waged against 'English Only' laws in the Southwest of the U.S., and in the renovated black nationalist consciousness that has sprung up around the use of the term 'African-American', encouraged most publicly by Jesse Jackson.

Refurbished for the late eighties, the revival of black nationalism still brings in its train a whole host of theoretical questions that have

never been adequately resolved. In addition, the new force of the hyphen in 'African-American' generates meanings that do not always sit well with the analysis of nationalists, the traditional keepers of Africanness. As a result of the prominence of nationalist ideas, the cultural importance of the 'African' portion of the term 'African-American' has a long and relatively well known activist history behind it. What may be more striking today, and what the nationalist paradigm cannot accommodate so easily, is the 'American' side, since it calls into question the position of the U.S. among the other American nations. If African-Americanism, at best, emphasizes a transnational black identity founded on the historical experience of the African diaspora in the Americas, north, south and central, then it also raises necessary questions about identity politics in Central and Latin American nation-states where the majority populations are the product of the long history of *mestizaje* – racial intermingling (European, African and Indian). These states constitute a vast cultural region comprising five hundred million people which José Martí, the hero of Cuban independence, called, in 1877, 'our *mestizo* America' ⁸

In 1992, the year that European nation-states will face the new challenge of unified markets, the quincentenary of Columbus's voyages will also be celebrated, nowhere more actively than in Spain, which will also host Expo '92 and the summer Olympics. But this event will surely be protested all over Spain's lost empire. Official ceremonies are planned in the U.S., although for the most part, the controversy over Columbus's 'discovery' is likely to be conveniently presented as a Latin and not a North American issue. Nonetheless, the occasion is likely to clear a space not only for indigenous and *mestizo* voices rarely allowed a public hearing, but also for further challenges to the powerful interests that are panic-investing in the idea of a U.S. national culture. The bicentennial anniversary of the U.S. Constitution in 1988 offered a similar opportunity for African-Americans and women to contest the modern picture of a democracy created by slave-owning framers, bent on exclusively white male suffrage.

The official U.S. debate about 'national culture' and 'cultural literacy' is clearly part of a backlash against the multicultural openings of the sixties and seventies, and its proponents are likely to further close their ranks as 1992 approaches. Placed on defensive alert by rapid economic decline, the Reagan-Bush era's obsession with nationalistic culture has now reached a new level of paranoia in anticipation of the pan-European concourse of nation-states in 1992, the nationalistically inspired break-up of the socialist bloc, and the growing power of transnational corporatism. Severely restricted, since Vietnam, in its capacity to openly intervene in other countries, Washington has found a new secular religion – the war against drugs has replaced anti-communism – which will help to appease its

8 Robert Fernandez Retamar has been, among other things, the most visible modern interpreter of Martí's idea of 'our America'. See his articles 'Our America and the West', *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 1–25 and 'Caliban: Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America', *Massachusetts Review* 15, nos. 1/2 (Winter–Spring 1974) pp. 7–72.

9 It was no surprise then to hear William Bennett, the nation's 'drug czar' who has compared himself to a Batman figure recently refer in a moment of forgetfulness on public television to plans for the drug war in Central and Latin America as 'the Indian strategy'

10 Sollors *op cit*, see particularly pp 37-8

imperialist hunger and legitimize a new U.S. military presence in drug-producing countries of Central and Latin America.⁹

For many reasons, then, the 'national culture' debate lies at the heart of any future programme for cultural studies in the Americas, where the rest of the world has been arriving for thousands of years. The primary task of such a programme in North America will be to dismantle the rhetoric of *consensus* and *consent* established in the Cold War period by liberals as the dominant explanatory trope for United States history, and revived now by their neo-conservative heirs in the campaign for 'cultural literacy'. What needs to be further challenged is the old story of American exceptionalism recounted in scholarship of the sort exemplified by a book like Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity*.¹⁰ In his book, Sollors poses the North American discourse of consent – a contractual commonwealth of agreement among free peoples – against the European discourse of descent – hereditary and ancestral rule over subject peoples – in order to explain a tidy history of immigrant settlement by choice, disturbed, in the terms of Sollors' argument, only by the 'exceptional' cases of pre-Columbian native peoples, kidnapped African slaves, and the Chicano populations of the Southwest. Sollors' model does not address the conditions under which the vast majority of the 'wretched refuse' and 'huddled masses' of immigrants came to North American shores; not by choice, but because of forced *transportation*, either literally as criminalized outlaws, or as a result of religious or cultural persecution and economic deprivation in other countries. Nor, since Sollors' model takes no account of the workings of capitalism, can he adequately explain what for him are continuing 'exceptional' conditions of domestic racial oppression 'slavery has posed a special problem to interpretations of America and poses a special problem to our enterprise'. Special indeed! More confused is his meditation on the 'paradox' whereby a cultural system based on consent not only *had* to have slavery but also segregation in a post-slavery period, both of which are descent-based formations, and the latter of which runs counter to the development, among post-emancipation African-Americans, of 'a new-world sense of peoplehood which was quite congruent with American consent patterns' Insanely strait-jacketed by the categories of consent and descent, haunted by the weary ghost of 'melting-pot' assimilationist theories, and bound by genteel codes which preclude any serious analysis of racism, Sollors' only explanation is that the aristocratic blood systems of the European order had somehow been carried over in a distorted way; in North America, the codes of descent were predicated upon the 'supposed *liability* of black blood'.

Models of the sort espoused by Sollors have been the dominant paradigm in North American cultural studies. The story they tell about the perpetual ethnogenesis of the United States draws

primarily upon the example of ethnic Puritanism, whose covenanting ideology is extended to the historical Puritanization of immigrant cultures. As a result, their guiding frame of reference continues to be East–West to the exclusion of narratives of power that obtain, in the history of the modern Americas, to North–South relations. The task, as ever, of the new cultural studies will be to convert the ‘special’, ‘exceptional’, or ‘paradoxical’ instances, problems and categories of the old East–West paradigm into dominant points of departure for a modern analysis of multicultural rights in the American nation-states. If American cultural studies is to be a multicultural studies, and if it is to do the right thing in 1992, then it will have to extend its horizons beyond the North American metropolis, which is where *Batman* and *Do the Right Thing* choose to recount their respective stories about cultural entitlement and disenfranchisement.

A brief look at a different region of the adult comics world – the Hernandez Brother’s hugely popular work on *Love and Rockets* – might serve as a salutary, concluding gesture. Far removed from the muscle-bound militancy of the superhero genre are the locales of the Hernandez’s stories, where female characters are the primary agents. One series, *Locas Tambien*, is set in a Southwestern barrio, and features the street adventures and domestic goings-on of two bisexual Chicana punkettes. The other series, *Heartbreak Soup*, feeds off the magic realism of a mythical Mexican village somewhere well to the south of Yanqui influence. Each is a place where heroism is fashioned out of everyday fantasies and come-uppances that are tailored to properly human size. Neither is guided in any serious way by the masculinist codes of ‘doing-what you gotta do’ which finally govern the worlds of *Batman* and *Do the Right Thing*, and which (both films share this logic) have ugly consequences for almost all of the female characters in these films.

Conceived and written as narratives that never converge, the two Hernandez series are nonetheless fundamentally related comedies about the metropolis and the province, the postmodern urban subculture and the underdeveloped peasant community, separated, in everyday political reality, by the heavily policed borders of a powerful nation-state. Like *Batman* and *Do the Right Thing*, then, they have a lot to say about each other, one from a centre, the other from a margin, and their respective pictures of communitarian life reflect this dialogue even if they do not explicitly enter into it.

Questions of genre

STEVE NEALE

THIS article will discuss some of the issues, concepts and concerns arising from work on genre in the cinema published over the last decade or so. It seeks to highlight a number of questions and problems which may pinpoint some possible directions for future research. I will be particularly concerned with the constitution of generic corpuses with the extent to which they are constituted by public expectations as well as by films, and with the role of theoretical terms, on the one hand, and industrial and institutional terms, on the other, in the study of genres. The concept of verisimilitude is central to an understanding of genre, as is the question of the social and cultural functions that genres perform. These, too, will be discussed. Stress will be laid throughout on the changing, and hence historical nature, not just of individual genres, but of generic regimes as well.

I shall be referring to several books and articles (and thus, to some extent, this piece will serve as an extended review) But at a number of key points I shall be taking my cue, explicitly or otherwise, from an article by Alan Williams entitled, 'Is A Radical Genre Criticism Possible?' (an article which is itself a review of Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres*, and to some extent of my own book, *Genre*)¹

Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that it raises so many fundamental questions, Williams' article has not been discussed as much as it deserves. In saying this, however, I should note that, insofar as I shall be concentrating here on America, American cinema and American genres, I shall myself be ignoring (or at least setting to one side), one of Williams' most important points – that "genre" is not exclusively or even primarily a Hollywood

¹ Alan Williams, 'Is A Radical Genre Criticism Possible?', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol 9 no 2 (Spring 1984)
Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: Random House 1981),
Steve Neale *Genre* (London: BFI 1980)

phenomenon', and that 'we need to get out of the United States.'² I concentrate on America partly because, as Williams himself notes elsewhere in his article, there is still an enormous amount of research to be done on what is still the most powerful national cinema in the world, and partly because most of the work published on genre and genres to date has tended overwhelmingly to concern itself with Hollywood. In order to engage with this work, it is necessary to engage with its object. However, I should like to note too that a number of the more general, conceptual points I wish to make are as applicable to the consideration of genre and genres in India or Japan or Italy or Britain as they are to America and Hollywood.

Expectation and verisimilitude

There are several general, conceptual points to make at the outset. The first is that genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labelled and defined. Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on. Thus, if, for instance, a character in a film for no reason (or no otherwise explicable reason) bursts into song, the spectator is likely to hypothesize that the film is a musical, a particular kind of film in which otherwise unmotivated singing is likely to occur. These systems also offer grounds for further anticipation. If a film is a musical, more singing is likely to occur, and the plot is likely to follow some directions rather than others.

Inasmuch as this is the case, these systems of expectation and hypothesis involve a knowledge of – indeed they partly embody – various regimes of verisimilitude, various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief. Verisimilitude means 'probable' or 'likely'.³ It entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and *therefore* probable (or probable and *therefore* appropriate).

Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre. (Bursting into song is appropriate, therefore probable – therefore intelligible, therefore believable – in a musical. Less so in a thriller or a war film.) As such these regimes entail rules, norms and laws. (Singing in a musical is not just a probability, it is a necessity. It is not just

3 For discussions of verisimilitude and genre see Ben Brewster, 'Film', in Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Michael Irwin (eds.), *Exploring Reality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), esp. pp. 147–149. Gerard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation', in *Figures*, vol. 3 (Paris: Seuil, 1969) and Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction and An Introduction to Verisimilitude' in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) and *Introduction to Poetics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981) esp. pp. 118–119.

likely to occur, it is bound to.) As Tzvetan Todorov, in particular, has insisted, there are two broad types of verisimilitude applicable to representations: generic verisimilitude on the one hand, and, on the other, a broader social or cultural verisimilitude. Neither equates in any direct sense to 'reality' or 'truth'.

If we study the discussions bequeathed us by the past, we realize that a work is said to have verisimilitude in relation to two chief kinds of norms. The first is what we call *rules of the genre*: for a work to be said to have verisimilitude, it must conform to these rules. In certain periods, a comedy is judged 'probable' only if, in the last act, the characters are discovered to be near relations. A sentimental novel will be probable if its outcome consists in the marriage of hero and heroine, if virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Verisimilitude, taken in this sense, designates the work's relation to literary discourse: more exactly, to certain of the latter's subdivisions, which form a genre.

But there exists another verisimilitude, which has been taken even more frequently for a relation with reality. Aristotle, however, has already perceived that the verisimilar is not a relation between discourse and its referent (the relation of truth), but between discourse and what readers believe is true. The relation is here established between the work and a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership; in other words, to *public opinion*. The latter is of course not 'reality' but merely a further discourse, independent of the work.⁴

⁴ Todorov (1981) *op. cit.* pp. 118–119

There are several points worth stressing here. The first is the extent to which, as the example of singing in the musical serves to illustrate, generic regimes of verisimilitude can ignore, sidestep, or transgress these broad social and cultural regimes.

The second is the extent to which this 'transgression' of cultural verisimilitude is characteristic of Hollywood genres. This has implications for conventional notions of 'realism'. There is, of course, always a balance in any individual genre between purely generic and broadly cultural regimes of verisimilitude. Certain genres appeal more directly and consistently to cultural verisimilitude. Gangster films, war films and police procedural thrillers, certainly, often mark that appeal by drawing on and quoting 'authentic' (and authenticating) discourses, artefacts and texts: maps, newspaper headlines, memoirs, archival documents, and so on. But other genres, such as science fiction, Gothic horror or slapstick comedy, make much less appeal to this kind of authenticity, and this is certainly one of the reasons why they tend to be despised, or at least 'misunderstood', by critics in the 'quality' press. For these critics, operating under an ideology of realism, adherence to cultural verisimilitude is a necessary condition of

'serious' film, television or literature. As Todorov goes on to argue, realism as an ideology can partly be defined by its refusal to recognize the reality of its own generic status, or to acknowledge its own adherence to a type of generic verisimilitude.

A third point to be made is that recent uses of the concept of verisimilitude in writing on genre tend to blur the distinction between generic and cultural verisimilitude, and tend therefore to vitiate the usefulness of the term. Both Christine Gledhill and Kathryn Kane, for instance, in writing about melodrama and the war film respectively, tend to use 'verisimilitude' simply as a synonym for 'realism' or 'authenticity'.⁵ This is a pity because, as, in fact, both Gledhill and Kane implicitly demonstrate, melodrama and the war film are genres which often themselves seek to blur the distinction between the cultural and the generic, and are often particularly marked by the tensions between the different regimes.

The fourth point is that, at least in the case of Hollywood, generic regimes of verisimilitude are almost as 'public', as widely known, as 'public opinion' itself. It is not simply in films or in genres that the boundaries between the cultural and the generic are blurred: the two regimes merge also in public discourse, generic knowledge becoming a form of cultural knowledge, a component of 'public opinion'.

Fifth, and finally, it is often the generically verisimilitudinous ingredients of a film, the ingredients, that is, which are often least compatible with regimes of cultural verisimilitude – singing and dancing in the musical, the appearance of the monster in the horror film – that constitute its pleasure, and that thus attract audiences to the film in the first place. They too, therefore, tend to be 'public', known, at least to some extent, in advance.

These last two remarks lead on to the next set of points, which concern the role and importance of specific institutional discourses, especially those of the press and the film industry itself, in the formation of generic expectations, in the production and circulation of generic descriptions and terms, and, therefore, in the constitution of any generic corpus.

Genre and institutional discourse

As John Ellis has pointed out, central to the practices of the film industry is the construction of a 'narrative image' for each individual film.

An idea of the film is widely circulated and promoted, an idea which can be called the 'narrative image' of the film, the cinema's anticipatory reply to the question, 'What is the film like?'⁶

The discourses of film industry publicity and marketing play a key role in the construction of such narrative images; but important, too,

5 Christine Gledhill 'The Melodramatic Field: An Introduction' in Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987) esp. p. 9. 'As a bourgeois form, melodrama is constrained by the same conditions of verisimilitude as realism. If the family melodrama speciality is generational and gender conflict, verisimilitude demands that the central issues of sexual difference and identity be realistically presented.' Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UMI Research Press, 1976), esp. p. 121. 'The achievement of *G.I. Joe* however is not really one of historical data providing the truth of what is portrayed. Rather its power is the result of an insistence on verisimilitude: the stylistic groundwork on which the authenticity props rest.'

6 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1981) p. 30.

are other institutionalized public discourses, especially those of the press and television, and the 'unofficial', 'word of mouth' discourses of everyday life.

Genre is, of course, an important ingredient in any film's narrative image. The indication of relevant generic characteristics is therefore one of the most important functions that advertisements, stills, reviews and posters perform. Reviews nearly always contain terms indicative of a film's generic status, while posters usually offer verbal generic (and hyperbolic) description – 'The Greatest War Picture Ever Made' – as anchorage for the generic iconography in pictorial form.

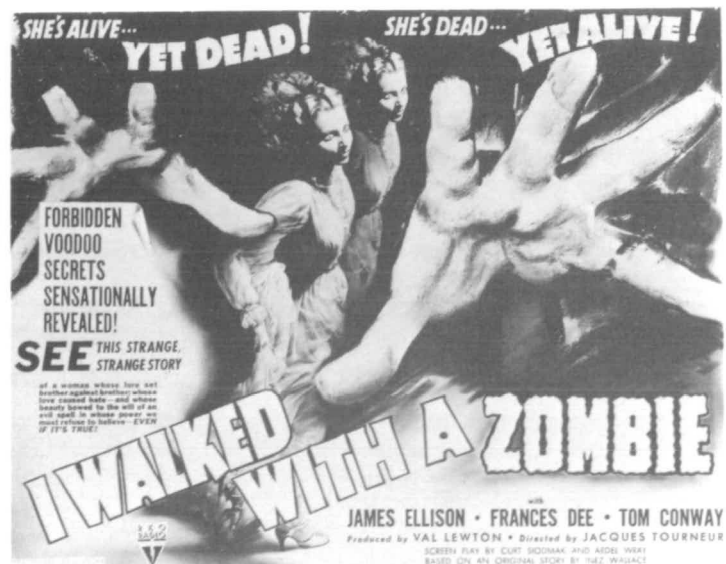
These various verbal and pictorial descriptions form what Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci have called the cinema's 'inter-textual relay'.⁷ This relay performs an additional, generic function: not only does it define and circulate narrative images for individual films, beginning the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation, it also helps to define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call 'generic images', providing sets of labels, terms and expectations which will come to characterize the genre as a whole.

This is a key point. It is one of the reasons why I agree with Lukow and Ricci on the need to take account of all the component texts in the industry's inter-textual relay when it comes to studying not only films, but genre and genres. And it is one of the reasons why I would disagree with Rick Altman, in *The American Film Musical*,⁸ on the limited significance he assigns to the role of industrial and journalistic discourses in establishing a generic corpus (though it is one of the many merits of Altman's book that he

7 Gregory Lukow and Steve Ricci, 'The "audience" goes "public": inter-textuality, genre, and the responsibilities of film literacy', *On Film*, no. 12 (Spring, 1984), p. 29.

8 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI, 1989).

Poster for *I Walked with a Zombie* (1946)
(Courtesy of Turner Home
Entertainments)



devotes the best part of a chapter to this issue. Most books and articles on genre fail to discuss it at all.)

For Altman, the role of industrial and journalistic terms is crucial in establishing the presence of generic consistencies, but of limited use in defining them:

The fact that a genre has previously been posited, defined, and delimited by Hollywood is taken only as *prime facie* evidence that generic levels of meaning are operative within or across a group of texts roughly designated by the Hollywood term and its usage. The industrial/journalistic term thus founds a hypothesis about the presence of meaningful activity, but does not necessarily contribute a definition or delimitation of the genre in question ⁹

9 *ibid* p 13

The identification of an industrial/journalistic term, then, is for Altman merely the first step in a multi-stage process. Having established a preliminary corpus in this way, the role of the critic is next to subject the corpus to analysis, to locate a method for defining and describing the structures, functions and systems specific to a large number of the films within it. Then the critic, using this method as a basis, reconstitutes and re-defines the corpus:

Texts which correspond to a particular understanding of the genre, that is which provide ample material for a given method of analysis, will be retained within the generic corpus. Those which are not illuminated by the method developed in step three will simply be excluded from the final corpus. In terms of the musical, this would mean admitting that there are some films which include a significant amount of diegetic music, and yet which we will refuse to identify as musicals in the strong sense which the final corpus implies ¹⁰

10 *ibid* p 14

Having thus established a final corpus, the critic is finally in a position to produce a history of the genre, and to analyse 'the way in which the genre is moulded by, functions within, and in turn informs the society of which it is a part.'¹¹

11 *ibid* pp 14-15

Before explaining my disagreement with this, it is important to recognize, along with Altman, that it is not possible to write about genres without being selective, and that many of the deficiencies of a good deal of writing on genre stem from defining and selecting on the basis of pre-established and unquestioned canons of films. As Alan Williams points out, this is one of the central deficiencies of Schatz's book, in which coverage of any given genre,

. . . depends not on historical or theoretical evenhandedness but on tacitly agreed-upon landmarks. Thus the chapter on the musical covers mainly Warner Brothers/Busby Berkely, Fred Astaire at RKO, and the Freed Unit at MGM. So where is Lubitsch and the operetta? (Maybe the latter is not 'a Musical'.

but *Hollywood Genres* does not explain) Al Jolson and the crucially important melodramatic musicals of the early sound years? Who decided that these points alone would suffice?¹²

In contrast, Altman's book is impressively wide in its range of references, and refreshingly free from established canons of taste and categorization, including as it does not only Jolson, operetta and Lubitsch, but also the Elvis Presley films of the fifties and sixties, and films like *Grease* (1978) and *Flashdance* (1983). It is important to say, too, that I agree with Altman that journalistic and industrial labels rarely, on their own, provide a conceptual basis for the analysis of genres, or for the location of generic patterns, structures and systems, just as I agree that such analysis is vitally important.

Where I disagree, however, is on Altman's assertion that the importance of industrial/journalistic terms is restricted to the first step of generic analysis. I disagree with this because I do not believe the aim of generic analysis is the re-definition of a corpus of films. Such an aim is in the end no different, in effect if not in intention, from the highly selective categorizations of Schatz, or from the worst, pigeon-holing inheritances of neo-classical literary theory. We can easily end up identifying the purpose of generic analysis with the rather fruitless attempt to decide which films fit, and therefore properly belong to, which genres. We can also end up constructing or perpetuating canons of films, privileging some and demoting or excluding others. (Thus even Altman, despite his broad range, and despite the power of his method, finds himself excluding films like *Dumbo* [1941] and *Bambi* [1942], and nearly excluding *The Wizard of Oz* [1939])

Such an aim is, therefore, inherently reductive. More than that, it is in danger of curtailing the very cultural and historical analysis upon which Altman rightly insists as an additional theoretical aim. The danger lies not only in the devaluation of industrial/journalistic discourses, but in the separation of genre analysis from a number of the features which define its public circulation. These features include the fact that genres exist always *in excess* of a corpus of works; the fact that genres comprise expectations and audience knowledge as well as films, and the fact that these expectations and the knowledge they entail are public in status. As Todorov has argued (while himself tending to equate genres solely with works):

One can always find a property common to two texts, and therefore put them together in one class. But is there any point in calling the result of such a union a 'genre'? I think that it would be in accord with the current usage of the word and at the same time provide a convenient and operant notion if we agreed to call 'genres' only those classes of texts that have been perceived as such in the course of history. The accounts of this perception are

found most often in the discourse on genres (the metadiscursive discourse) and, in a sporadic fashion, in the texts themselves.¹³

As far as the cinema is concerned (Todorov here is writing about literature – and High Literature at that), this metadiscursive discourse is to be found in its inter-textual relay. Clearly, generic expectations and knowledges do not emanate solely from the film industry and its ancillary institutions; and clearly, individual spectators may have their own expectations, classifications, labels and terms. But these individualized, idiosyncratic classifications play little part, if any, in the public formation and circulation of genres and generic images. In the public sphere, the institutional discourses are of central importance. Testimony to the existence of genres, and evidence of their properties, is to be found primarily there.

A distinction needs to be made, then, between those studies of genres conceived as institutionalized classes of texts and systems of expectation, and studies which use critically or theoretically constructed terms as the basis for discussing classes of films. (Studies of *film noir* are obvious examples of the latter.) A distinction also needs to be made between institutionally recognized sub-genres, cycles and categories ('operetta' and 'the singing Western') and theoretically or scholarly based classifications ('The Fairy Tale Musical', 'The Show Musical', and 'The Folk Musical'). This is not to argue that theoretically based studies and classifications are somehow illegitimate. (Far from it. These examples all illustrate how productive they can be.) It is, however, to insist on the pertinence of Todorov's distinction for an understanding of what it is that is being studied.

Institutional discourses and genre history

Not only do industrial and journalistic labels and terms constitute crucial evidence for an understanding of both the industry's and the audience's generic conceptions in the present, they also offer virtually the only available evidence for a historical study of the array of genres in circulation, or of the ways in which individual films have been generically perceived at any point in time. This is important for an understanding of the ways in which both the array and the perceptions have changed.

Let me give some examples. Both 'the Western' and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) are firmly established in genre studies, the latter as an early, highly influential example of the former. However, in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Eric Partridge dates the first colloquial use of the term 'Western' in anything other than an adjectival sense to around 1910. The first use of the term cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with reference to

3 WESTERN "AMERICANS" EVERY WEEK

A "CHEERFUL MESSAGE TO THE INDEPENDENT EXHIBITOR! GOOD "WESTERNS" INvariably "PULL" AT THE BOX OFFICE—YOU KNOW THAT'S TRUE IF YOU EVER NEGLECTED YOUR WEEKLY ALLOTMENT OF "WESTERNS"—AMERICAN "WESTERNS"—REMEMBER—NO PROGRAM OF THREE OR MORE PICTURES IS COMPLETE WITHOUT AN OUT-OF-DOORS WESTERN—AND, THAT BEING THE CASE, SEE THAT YOU GET THE BEST—AND "BEST" IS JUST ANOTHER WAY OF SPELLING "AMERICAN."



"It Pays To Wait"

(Release Monday, July 30, 1912)

A Smashing, Rollicking Good Western Comedy illustrating that old wag, Natural Situations backed by side-splitting pantomime and superfine photography. A picture, clean, healthy and simply overflowing with good-natured fun.



"The Fight At The Mill"

(Release Wednesday, July 31, 1912)

A powerful Western, distinctly original and exciting. A Western containing a beautiful story of a man and Indian battle that will interest and thrill.

"A Life For A Kiss"

(Release Thursday, August 1, 1912)

A magnificent subject telling a pretty story of a fighting Western, full of gun play, and containing all the splendid stock of good-natured fun.

"THE BATTLE-GROUND"

(Regular Release Monday, August 12) TWO REELS

An Emotional Masterpiece. A second "Lullaby" of "Madam X" for splendid dramatic situations. A two-reel feature of absorbing beauty. Intertwining some powerful scenes in the Sanctuary of Great Mother's Church with the life of the gutter in the slum districts of Chicago. "The Battle-Ground" is a story dealing with the most emotions of the human heart. Read synopsis for a wonderful full story.

"THE FALL OF BLACKHAWK"

(That Monster TWO-REEL HISTORICAL with Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Zachary Taylor, and General Winfield Scott the central characters) is meeting with the Big success we predicted. A few States unsold, offering a splendid opportunity to Live State Rights Buyers.

American Film Mfg. Co. FIFTH FLOOR, ASHLAND BLOCK : : CHICAGO



The Moving Picture World,
20 July, 1912

a film dates from 1912, occurring in a review of *The Fight at the Mill* (1912) in an issue of the trade magazine, *The Moving Picture World*, dated 27 July. This was nine years after *The Great Train Robbery* was released.

Now it may be argued, of course, that this is merely quibbling. While the specific term 'Western' may not have been available to audiences in 1903, Westerns themselves, in the form of dime novels, Wild West shows, paintings, illustrations, short stories and the like (as well as one or two films), had been around for some time.¹⁴ Thus audiences of *The Great Train Robbery*, well-accustomed to these forms, would have drawn on the paradigms they provided in understanding and locating the film. Charles Musser, however, has convincingly argued that this was not the case, that the paradigms used both by the industry and its audiences were different, and that

¹⁴ On 'the Western' prior to the emergence of the cinema, and on all these forms, see Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: André Deutsch/BFI, 1988), pp. 18–22.

it was the confluence of paradigms provided by melodrama, the 'chase film', the 'railway genre' and the 'crime film', rather than 'the Western', which ensured the film's contemporary success:

Kenneth MacGowan attributed this success . . . to the fact that the film was 'the first important Western', William Everson and George Fenin find it important because it is 'the blueprint for all Westerns'. These, however, are retrospective readings. One reason for *The Great Train Robbery's* popularity was its ability to incorporate so many trends, genres and strategies fundamental to the institution of cinema at that time. The film includes elements of both re-enactment of contemporary news events (the train hold-up was modeled after recently reported crimes) and refers to a well-known stage melodrama by its title. Perhaps most importantly, *The Great Train Robbery* was part of a violent crime

THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD 47

THE TRIUMPH OF WESTERN REALISM!!
Now Ready for State Right Men

Most sensational and true-to-life picture ever acted before a camera. Every scene an actuality.

THE LAST STAND OF THE
DALTON BOYS
At Coffeyville, Kansas

2900 FEET - 3 REELS 90 TRUE SCENES

Pictures Posed By People That Actually Took Part In The Raid

This picture and all future releases will be under the personal direction of Mr. Jack Kenyon, formerly of the Selig Company, and will be acted by his well-known star Co. of motion picture actors.

The picture opens at the childhood home of the Daltons, where as boys they played together and were brought up by a devoted mother, who believed in the Good Book from 'kisses to kisses'. The boys grown to manhood, and the appointment of Frank Dalton as Deputy U. S. Marshal—His bravery and courage in doing his duty as a servant of Uncle Sam in stamping out that evil of the Southwest—'Hole-baggers'—Why it is a crime to sell whiskey to an Indian—Frank Dalton meets his death in performance of his duty—His brothers join the U. S. Marshals—Through political chicanery and malice, the Daltons are ousted from the service without their back pay (but with the knowledge of headquarters, but through the crankiness of a U. S. Marshal of that district)—Then the Dalton Gang was organized—The Daltons terrorized the Southwest, until the final raid at Coffeyville, Kansas—You will see Emmet Dalton, the last of the Dalton Gang, whose home is at Bartlesville, Okla.—The Old Liveryman at Coffeyville—The man who did the killing of the Dalton Gang—The actual cave—The posse of U. S. Marshals—Swimming the Arkansas River—Bob Dalton winning a bucking horse contest—The actual store where they purchased ammunition—Sensational fight in Death Valley—The bank robbery—Emmet Dalton's escape and his return when warning his brother was wounded—The shooting of Emmet and his arrest as he lay helpless in Death Valley—His situation and pardon.

Watch for This One! **Coming Out Soon!**

DEADWOOD DICK
"THE HERO OF THE BLACK HILLS"

It will be perfect in photography. It will be big enough to get big money. Write wire, telegraph—but get this feature quick.

Atlas Manufacturing Co., 412 Century Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.
 BELL OLIVE 2131—TELEPHONES—KINLOCH, CENTRAL 4716

The Moving Picture World,
 28 July, 1912

genre which had been imported from England a few months earlier Porter was consciously working (and cinema patrons viewing) within a framework established by Sheffield Photo's *Daring Daylight Burglary*, British Gaumont/Walter Haggart's *Desperate Poaching Affair* [sic This should be *Affray*] and R.W Paul's *Trailed by Bloodhounds* . . . [Thus] When initially released, *The Great Train Robbery* was not primarily perceived in the context of the Western. Its success did not encourage other Westerns but other films of crime – Lubin's *Bold Bank Robbery*, Paley and Steiner's *Burned at the Stake*, and Porter's own *Capture of the Yegg Bank Robbers* . . . It was only when the Western genre emerged as a vital force in the nickelodeon era that *The Great Train Robbery* was interpreted from this new perspective.¹⁵

15 Charles Musser 'The Travel Genre in 1903-04 Moving Toward Fictional Narratives', *Iris*, vol 2, no 1 (1er semestre, 1984), pp 56-57. The references here are to Kenneth MacGowan *Behind the Screen* (New York Delacorte, 1965), p 114, and George Fenin and William K Everson, *The Western From Silents to Cinerama* (New York Orion Press 1962), p 49

16 Ralph Cohen 'History and Genre', *New Literary History*, vol 17 no 2 (Winter 1986) p 207

17 Todorov (1976) *op cit* p 103

Musser's argument here serves to indicate, in addition to the change in generic status of *The Great Train Robbery*, the extent to which different periods in the history of the American cinema have been marked by different generic systems, different 'generic regimes'. It is an important theoretical point that genres 'do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members',¹⁶ and that, 'each era has its own system of genres'.¹⁷ Company catalogues are a particularly useful resource in establishing the generic regimes of the earliest years of the cinema. Their terminology and their groupings indicate the considerable differences between these regimes and the regimes of the studio era. Thus instead of the Westerns, horror films and war films of later years, the Kleine Optical Company's catalogue for 1905 lists films in the following groupings:

1. Story
 - a. historical
 - b. dramatic
 - c. narrative
2. Comic
3. Mysterious
4. Scenic
5. Personalities¹⁸

18 *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Machines Stereopticons Slides, Films* (Chicago: Kleine Optical Company November 1905) p 36

19 *Biograph Bulletins 1896-1908*, compiled by Kemp R. Niver (Los Angeles: Locaire Research Group, 1971) pp 59-73

Meanwhile, Biograph's 'Advance Partial List' of films for sale in 1902 lists its 'subject' under the following titles and headings: Comedy Views, Sports and Pastime Views, Military Views, Railroad Views, Scenic Views, Views of Notable Personages, Miscellaneous Views, Trick Pictures, Marine Views, Children's Pictures, Fire and Patrol Views, Pan-American Exposition Views, Vaudeville Views, and Parade Pictures.¹⁹ (The number of 'documentary' or 'actuality' categories here is, of course, indicative of the extent to which

documentary genres far outweighed fiction in the period prior to 1903/4).

In demonstrating the degree to which genre categories and generic regimes have changed, these examples illustrate the historical character of all genres. Genres are inherently temporal: hence, their inherent mutability on the one hand, and their inherent historicity on the other. In disagreeing with Altman on the significance of institutional discourses, I now wish to focus attention on a further aspect of that temporality.

Genre as process

It may at first sight seem as though repetition and sameness are the primary hallmarks of genres: as though, therefore, genres are above all inherently static. But as Hans Robert Jauss and Ralph Cohen (and I myself) have argued, genres are, nevertheless, best understood as *processes*.²⁰ These processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change.

The process-like nature of genres manifests itself as an interaction between three levels: the level of expectation, the level of the generic corpus, and the level of the 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both. Each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time. Some elements are included; others are excluded. Indeed some are mutually exclusive: at most points in its history, the horror film has had to characterize its monster *either* supernaturally – as in *Dracula* (1930) – *or* psychologically – as in *Psycho* (1960). In addition, each new genre film tends to extend this repertoire, either by adding a new element or by transgressing one of the old ones. Thus, for instance, *Halloween* (1979) transgressed the division between psychological and supernatural monsters, giving its monster the attributes of both. In this way the elements and conventions of a genre are always *in* play rather than being, simply, *re-played*;²¹ and any generic corpus is always being expanded.

Memories of the films within a corpus constitute one of the bases of generic expectation. So, too, does the stock of generic images produced by advertisements, posters and the like. As both corpus and image expand and change with the appearance of new films, new advertising campaigns, new reviews, so also what Jauss has termed the 'horizon of expectation' appropriate to each genre expands and changes as well.

. the relationship between the individual text and the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the

²⁰ Cohen, *op cit.*, p. 205–206
Hans Robert Jauss *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: The Harvester Press 1982), p. 80
Neale *op cit.* p. 19

²¹ I owe this phrase to an unpublished lecture on genre by Elizabeth Cowie

continual founding and altering of horizons. The new text evokes for the reader (or listener) the horizon of expectations and 'rules of the game' familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced.²²

²² Jauss *op cit*, p. 79

This is one reason why it is so difficult to list exhaustively the characteristic components of individual genres, or to define them in anything other than the most banal or tautological terms: a Western is a film set on the American Western frontier; a war film is a film that represents the waging of war; a detective film is a film about the investigation of criminals and crime, and so on. More elaborate definitions always seem to throw up exceptions. Altman provides an example. He cites Jean Mitry's definition of the Western as a "film whose action, situated in the American West, is consistent with the atmosphere, the values and the conditions of existence in the Far West between 1840 and 1900"²³ He then goes on to cite an exception, the 'Pennsylvania Western'

²³ Jean Mitry *Dictionnaire du Cinéma* (Paris Larousse, 1963) p. 276, cit Altman *op cit* p. 95

To most observers it seems quite clear that films like *High, Wide and Handsome* (Mamoulian, 1937), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (Ford, 1939), and *Unconquered* (DeMille, 1947) have definite affinities with the western. Employing familiar characters set in relationships similar to their counterparts west of the Mississippi, these films construct plots and develop a frontier structure clearly derived from decades of western novels and films. But they do it in Pennsylvania, and in the wrong century.²⁴

²⁴ Altman *op cit*, p. 96

Exclusive definitions, lists of *exclusive* characteristics, are particularly hard to produce. At what point do Westerns become musicals like *Oklahoma!* (1955) or *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954)? At what point do Singing Westerns become musicals? At what point do comedies with songs (like *A Night at the Opera* (1935)) become musical comedies? And so on.

These examples all, of course, do more than indicate the process-like nature of individual genres. They also indicate the extent to which individual genres not only form part of a generic regime, but also themselves change, develop and vary by borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another. Hybrids are by no means the rarity in Hollywood many books and articles on genre in the cinema would have us believe. This is one reason why, as Marc Vernet has pointed out, 'a guide to film screenings will often offer to the spectator rubrics like: western, detective film, horror film, and comedy, but also: dramatic comedy, psychological drama, or even erotic detective film.'²⁵ Indeed, in its classical era, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have shown, nearly all Hollywood's films were hybrids insofar as they always tended to combine one type of generic plot, a romance plot, with others.²⁶ Moreover, it is at least arguable that

²⁵ Marc Vernet, 'Genre', *Film Reader* 3 (February 1978), p. 13

²⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London Routledge, 1985), pp. 16-17

many of the most apparently 'pure' and stable genres, both inside and outside the cinema, initially evolved by combining elements from previously discrete and separate genres either within or across specific generic regimes. Ernest Mandel, for example, has argued that the detective genre emerged in this way, by combining three such generically disparate elements: 'the "reverse story" . . . developed by Godwin (*Caleb Williams*, 1794), the divination deduction technique originated in Persia and introduced into modern literature by Voltaire (*Zadig*); and the *coup de théâtre*, borrowed from melodrama.'²⁷ Similarly, Richard Traubner has shown, in painstaking detail, both how operetta emerged by combining the features of *opera buffa*, German *Singspiel* and British ballad opera, and how it subsequently evolved by displacing some of these features, and replacing them with elements of burlesque and revue; then, in America at least, displacing these in turn, until the genre finally emerged as the 'musical play' with shows (and films) like *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *Brigadoon*, *Carousel*, *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady*.²⁸

²⁷ Ernest Mandel *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London and Sydney Pluto Press 1984), p. 18

²⁸ Richard Traubner *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (London Victor Gollancz 1984)

Hence the importance of *historicizing* generic definitions and the parameters both of any single generic corpus, and of any specific generic regime. For it is not that more elaborated definitions are impossible to provide, just that they are always historically relative, and therefore historically specific. It is not that the process-like nature of genres renders generalizations invalid. Genre films, genres and generic regimes are always marked by boundaries and by frameworks: boundaries and frameworks which always have limits. Thus even hybrids are recognized as hybrids – combinations of specific and distinct generic components – not as genres in their own right. (This is why I would prefer to say, not as Jim Collins has recently done that a genre text always 're-makes' norms, but rather that a genre text always either re-works them, extends them, or transforms them altogether).²⁹ The point, though, is that if these limits are historically specific, they can only be determined empirically, not theoretically.

²⁹ Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York and London Routledge, 1989) p. 46

Genre history: three approaches

There currently seem to exist three major ways in which genre history has been conceived. The first is what Jauss has called 'the evolutionary schema of growth, flowering and decay'.³⁰ This schema is open to several objections: it is teleological; it is (for all its organic metaphors) highly mechanistic; and it treats genres in isolation from any generic regime.

Similar objections apply to a second model of evolutionary development used by Thomas Schatz, in which genres progress

³⁰ Jauss *op cit* p. 88

towards self-conscious formalism. Here is Williams' description of Schatz's approach:

As genres change over time, and their audiences become more and more self-conscious, genres progress from transparency to opacity, 'from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism' (p. 38). Not all genres complete this cycle unimpeded. Gangster Films, for example, were disrupted by the threat of censorship as were, at various points, War Films. (Williams, p. 123)

To this Williams poses a theoretical objection:

Note that Schatz locates this shift to opacity *within individual genres*, such that a 'new' genre in the 1980s would have to go through a 'classical' stage before evolving into self-conscious formalism. It is not the filmmaking system or the social context that has changed, but the genres that have evolved. (In my opinion, this is clearly wrong) (p. 123)

and an empirical objection

One can find self-conscious Westerns, such as Fairbanks' *Wild and Woolly*, as early as the late teens. In fact, the entire mid-to-late silent cinema seems remarkably 'formalistic', which is possibly one reason it is wholly absent from Schatz's book. (pp. 123–4)

(A similar point has been made at greater length, and to equally devastating effect, in an article by Tag Gallagher.³¹)

The third historical model is the one provided by the Russian Formalists.³² It has the virtue of embedding the history of individual genres within the history, not just of generic formations, but of wider cultural formations as well. It is perhaps best known for Tynyanov's concept of 'the dominant' (with its correlative concept of genre history as the displacement of one dominant genre by another),³³ and by Shklovsky's idea that such displacements occur according to a principle known as 'the canonization of the junior branch'. 'When the "canonized" art forms reach an impasse, the way is paved for the infiltration of the elements of non-canonized art, which by this time have managed to evolve new artistic devices.'³⁴ Quoting from Juri Streidter's introduction to a German anthology of Russian Formalist texts, here is Jauss's description of the Formalists' conception as a whole:

The Formalist conception of genre as a historical system of relations participates in the attempt to replace the classical notion of literary tradition – as a steady, unilinear, cumulative course – with the dynamic principle of literary *evolution*, by which they do not mean an analogy to organic growth or to Darwinian selection. For here 'evolution' is supposed to characterize the phenomenon

31 Tag Gallagher 'Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the "Evolution" of the Western', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1986)

32 See in particular Boris Eikhenbaum 'The Theory of the Formal Method' and Yuri Tynyanov 'On Literary Evolution both in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications 1978), and Viktor Shklovsky's views as summarized both in these works and in Victor Erlich *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1981), pp. 259–260

33 Tynyanov *op cit* pp. 72–73

34 Quoted in Erlich *op cit.*, p. 260

of literary 'succession' 'not in the sense of a continuous "development," but rather in the sense of a "struggle" and "break" with immediate predecessors through a contemporary recourse to something older.' In the historical evolution of literature thus understood, literary genres can be grasped in the periodic alternation of the dominating role as well as in a sequence of rivalries. (Jauss, p. 105)

In addition,

From a diachronic perspective the historical alternation of the dominating genre manifests itself in the three steps of canonization, automation, and reshuffling. Successful genres . . . gradually lose their effective power through continual reproduction, they are forced to the periphery by new genres often arising from a 'vulgar' stratum if they cannot be reanimated through a restructuring (be it through the playing up of previously suppressed themes or methods, or through the taking up of materials or the taking-over of functions from other genres). (p. 106)

There is clearly a great deal here that is both attractive and useful. As a theory or model, it takes account of the historicity, not only of genres, but of specific generic regimes; it takes account of their process-like nature; and, in its insistence on the importance of an interplay between canonized and non-canonized forms of representation, and between canonized and non-canonized genres, it takes account both of the transience of generic hierarchies, and of the role of hybridization in the formation and dissolution of individual genres.

In sketching the application of this model to the American cinema, one could argue, for instance, that the cinema itself arose in, and as, the conjunction of a variety of art forms – canonized and otherwise – from photography, through pictorial entertainments and spectacles like the diorama, the zoétrope and the magic lantern show, to magic itself, and to the vaudeville routine. Its earliest generic regime, in America as elsewhere, was dominated by the genres associated with these forms: the moving snapshot or 'view', re-enacted and reconstructed news, trick films, and slapstick and gag-based comedy. Subsequent to this, there is a shift to a predominance of fiction, in particular of melodrama (whether in its thrilling, mysterious, domestic or spectacular guise) on the one hand, and of comedy on the other. With accompanying subdivisions, and with the addition of genres like the musical, this 'dominant' came to be stabilized in the era of oligopoly and studio control. Later, in a period of crisis and re-adjustment, 'adult' drama and 'epic' values – marked by, and derived principally from, the epic itself, and spreading from there to the western, the war film, the

musical, and even, with films like *The Great Race* (1965) and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), to slapstick comedy – gained a position of dominance, though by now beginning to jockey for position with ‘exploitation’ genres, and the ‘juvenilization’ of Hollywood’s output. Finally, more recently, the process of juvenilization has continued, with the emergence of the ‘teenpic’, and the predominance of sci-fi and horror. Meanwhile, in exemplary illustration of Shklovsky’s thesis, some of these genres, in combination with serial-derived individual films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Romancing the Stone* (1984), have been promoted from the ‘junior branches’ of Hollywood’s output to achieve hegemony within the realms of the family blockbuster

What is particularly valuable about the Formalists’ model is that it neither prescribes the conditions for generic outmodedness, nor specifies any single mechanism by which non-canonized forms, devices or genres might find a place within generic regimes or assume a position of dominance within them. It allows for a variety of factors and reasons. This is especially important in the case of the cinema, where, for example, the initial predominance of actuality genres is as much a consequence of technological factors as it is of their popularity or ‘canonization’ elsewhere in the contemporary culture, and where, on the other hand, the promotion and predominance of ‘juvenile’ genres is as much a consequence of market research and the targeting of audiences,³⁵ and, in some cases, of new special-effects techniques, as it is of any new-found aesthetic vitality.³⁶

What, meanwhile, is particularly striking about this historical sketch is the extent to which many genres either originated in forms and institutions of entertainment other than the cinema, or were (and are) circulated additionally by them. Melodrama, for example, originated on the stage. It fed from there, in a process of increasing and mutual interaction, firstly into written fiction then into the cinema. All the while, in all three fields, it generated sub-divisions like the crime story, the mystery, the adventure story and the romance, as well as domestic drama. Comedy came from vaudeville, the circus, burlesque and the newspaper cartoon strip, as well as from the ‘legitimate’ stage, and, later, from radio and television. The musical came from Broadway (and its songs from Tin Pan Alley). Cheap hardback and paperback books, meanwhile, together with both ‘slick’ and ‘pulp’ magazines, comic books, comic strips and mass-produced fiction of all kinds, helped in some cases to originate, and in all cases to circulate, genres like the Western, the detective story and the thriller, horror, science-fiction, war and romance. This generic fiction often appeared in series or serial format with precise generic titles and names: *Adventure Library* (1897), *The Detective Library* (1917), *Western Story Magazine* (1919), *Thrill Book* (1919), *Love Story Magazine* (1921), *Love Story*

³⁵ On exploitation, juvenilization and the emergence of the teenpic, see Thomas Docherty *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988)

³⁶ On the role of special effects see Steve Neale ‘Hollywood Strikes Back – Special Effects in Recent American Cinema’, *Screen*, vol. 21 no. 3 (1981) pp. 101–105

37 Dates for series titles indicate initial year of publication. On mass-produced fiction series and genres, see among others, Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West Popular Western Fiction 1860–1960* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Tony Goodstone (ed.), *The Pulps Fifty Years of American Pop Culture* (New York: Chelsea House, 1970); Ron Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books* (Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1986); Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Quentin Reynolds *The Fiction Factory, or From Pulp Row to Quality Street* (New York: Random House, 1955); Frank L. Schick *The Paperbound Book in America* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1958); and Piet Schreuders, *The Book of Paperbacks A Visual History of the Paperback* (London: Virgin Books, 1981).

38 The only books dealing with a number of genres across a variety of institutions and forms, remain so far as I am aware John G. Caweltz *Adventure Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), and Robert C. Toll, *The Entertainment Machine American Show Business in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Research is also needed on the institutional connections between the cinema, the theatre, radio, television and popular music which in part enable cross-media generic circulation. For a summary and bibliography of some of the work to date, see Calvin Fryluck 'Industrialization of Entertainment in the United States' in Bruce A. Austin (ed.) *Current Research in Film*

Library (1926), *War Stories* (1922), *Gangster Stories*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction* (1942), *Bestseller Mysteries* (1942), *The Vault of Horror* (1950), and so on.³⁷

It is worth, at this point, signalling the need for a great deal more research both on cross-media generic formation and circulation, and, as a corollary, on the particular contributions of individual institutions and forms.³⁸ More research is needed, too, on the aesthetically specific transformations and adaptations each genre undergoes in each institution and form.³⁹

Finally, I should like to move on to discuss a set of questions to do with the aesthetic characteristics of mass-produced genres, their institutional functions within the cinema, and their putative social, cultural and ideological significance.

The first point to make here is, again, an historical one. It concerns the provenance, and status, of the term 'genre' itself, its applicability to the cinema, and its role in characterizing not only the cinema, but mass-produced art and entertainment in general. It is a point which, once more, has usefully been focussed by Williams:

Perhaps the biggest problem with genre theory or genre criticism in the field of cinema is the word *genre*. Borrowed, as a critical tool, from literary studies . . . the applicability of 'genre' as a concept in film studies raises some fairly tough questions. Sample genres are held to be Westerns, Science Fiction Films, more recently Disaster Films, and so on. What do these loose groupings of works – that seem to come and go, for the most part, in ten- and twenty-year cycles – have to do with familiar literary genres such as tragedy, comedy, romance, or (to mix up the pot a bit) the epistolary novel or the prose poem? (Williams, p. 121)

He continues,

For the phrase 'genre films', referring to a general category, we can frequently, though not always, substitute 'film narrative.' Perhaps *that* is the real genre. Certainly there is much more difference between *Prelude to Dog Star Man* and *Star Wars* than there is between the latter and *Body Heat*. It's mainly a question of terminology, of course, but I wonder if we ought to consider the principal genres as being narrative film, experimental/avant-garde film, and documentary. Surely these are the categories in film studies that have among themselves the sorts of significant differences that one can find between, say, epic and lyric poetry. If we reserve this level for the term *genre*, then film genres will by definition have the kind of staying power seen in literary genres. What we presently call film genres would then be *sub-genres*. (pp. 121–22)

39 The kind of studies I have in mind are best instanced to date by Altman's book on the Musical, especially his emphasis on edited alternation in constructing a dual focus' narrative, and his concepts of the 'Audio' and 'Video Dissolve' *op cit esp* pp 16-27 and 59-89. John Mueller's book, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986) especially the section on 'Astaire's Use of the Camera' pp 26-34 and Christine Saxton's *Illusions of Grandeur: The Representation of Space in the American Western* (University Microfilms Inc: Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1988)

40 Cohen *op cit*, p 203

41 Terry Threadgold 'Talking about genre: ideologies and incompatible discourses' *Cultural Studies* vol 3, no 1 (January 1989), pp 121-122

42 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Popular Culture' *New Formations* no 2, Summer 1987

In many ways, it seems to me, Williams is right about this. However, apart from the fact that, as he himself says, it is 'probably too late' to change things, there is an important qualification to be made.

As Ralph Cohen has pointed out, the term 'genre' is a nineteenth century term.⁴⁰ Thus, although the concept is clearly much older, the term itself emerges precisely at the time that popular, mass-produced generic fiction is making its first appearance (its genres, incidentally, just as susceptible to Williams' strictures). At the same time, also, there began to emerge a distinct shift in the value placed on generic literature by 'High Culture' artists and critics. As Terry Threadgold has explained, prior to the advent of Romanticism 'it was *literature* that was generic',

The rest, the 'popular culture' of political pamphlets, ballads, romances, chapbooks, was not only *not* literature, but also *not* generic; it escaped the law of genre, suffering a kind of rhetorical exclusion by inclusion in the classical distinction between high, middle, and low styles. It was seen as a kind of anarchic, free area, unconstrained by the rules of polite society and decorum, by *genre* in fact.⁴¹

With the emergence of new technologies, new capital, mass production, new means of distribution (notably the railway), with the formation of a relatively large, literate (or semi-literate) population (with the formation, therefore, of a market), and with the commodification of all forms of leisure and entertainment, the equation is reversed. Now it is 'popular culture', mass culture, that is generic, ruled as it is by market pressures to differentiate to a limited degree in order to cater to various sectors of consumers, and to repeat commercially successful patterns, ingredients and formulas. By contrast, 'true literature' is marked by self-expression, creative autonomy, and originality, and hence by a freedom from all constrictions and constraints, including those of genre.

It is at this point absolutely crucial to disentangle a number of assumptions and conflations, for it is at this point that a great deal of 'genre theory' (indeed 'popular cultural theory' in general) tends to go astray. Firstly, of course, it has to be recognized that no 'artist', in whatever sphere of aesthetic production, at whatever period in history, in whatever form of society, has ever been free either of aesthetic conventions and rules, or of specific institutional constraints (whether he or she has reacted against them or not). Secondly, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has recently re-emphasized, *all* cultural and artistic production in Western societies is now, and has been for some time, subject to capitalist conditions of production, distribution and exchange, hence to commodification.⁴² (This means, among other things, both that High Cultural art that still draws upon 'traditional', pre-capitalist genres like lyric poetry, and High

Cultural art that eschews both 'traditional' and modern, 'popular' genres is still itself 'generic' insofar as it is thereby still engaged in catering for a sector of the market, still involved in a form of product differentiation).⁴³ The third point is that it is indeed, therefore, the case that mass-produced, popular genres have to be understood within an economic context, as conditioned by specific economic imperatives and by specific economic contradictions – in particular, of course, those that operate within specific institutions and industries. That is why it is important to stress the financial advantages to the film industry of an aesthetic regime based on regulated difference, contained variety, pre-sold expectations, and the re-use of resources in labour and materials. It is also why it is important to stress the peculiar nature of films as *aesthetic* commodities, commodities demanding at least a degree of novelty and difference from one to another, and why it is necessary to explore the analogies and the distinctions between cycles and genres in the cinema, on the one hand, and models and lines in the field of non-artistic commodity production, on the other.

Failure to recognize these points results in approaches to genre which are inadequate and simplistic. It is worth specifying two such approaches here. The first is what Altman has called the 'ritual' approach, and Thomas Schatz (along with Will Wright and John Cawelti, a pioneer of this particular approach) once again serves as an example.⁴⁴ Here is Williams' summary

The repetitive nature of genre production and consumption produces active but indirect audience participation; successful genres are 'stories the audience has isolated through its collective response'. Hence genre filmmaking can be examined as 'a form of collective cultural expression' (pp. 12–13) (Williams, p. 123)

Quite apart from the doubtful assumption that consumer decision-making can be considered a form of 'cultural expression', and quite apart from the tendency of such an approach to conflate the multiplicity of reasons for consumer 'choices' and a multiplicity of readings of these 'choices', the 'ritual' theory of genres is open to question on other grounds. Principal among these is that it ignores the role of institutional determinations and decisions, by-passing the industry and the sphere of production in an equation between market availability, consumer choice, consumer preference, and broader social and cultural values and beliefs. This is an equation open to challenge on its own grounds. During the studio era, for instance, Westerns were regularly produced in large numbers, despite the fact that, as Garth Jowett has shown, such market research as was conducted at this time indicated that the genre was popular only with young adolescent boys and sectors of America's rural population, and that it was *actively disliked* more than it was liked by the viewing population as a whole.⁴⁵

⁴³ For a discussion of this in relation to the cinema see Steve Neale *Art Cinema as Institution* *Screen* vol. 22 no. 1 (1981)

⁴⁴ Cawelti, *op cit*; Schatz *op cit*; Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley University of California Press 1975)

⁴⁵ Garth S. Jowett *Giving Them What They Want: Movie Audience Research Before 1950* in Bruce A. Austin (ed.), *Current Research in Film: Audience Economics and Law* vol. 1 (Norwood New Jersey Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985)

Second, objections can also be made to what Altman calls the 'ideological approach' to genre, an approach which recognizes the capitalist nature of the film industry, and the status of its films as commodities, but which treats genres simply as vehicles for 'capitalist' (or 'the dominant') 'ideology'.⁴⁶ This approach is open to the charges of reductivism, economism, and cultural pessimism.⁴⁷ It tends to presume, in the final analysis, that representations reflect their social and economic conditions of existence, that institutions and social formations necessarily secure their own reproduction, and, in Colin MacCabe's words, that 'the meanings of texts are always finally anchored in a class struggle which is not to be understood in cultural terms'.⁴⁸ As both MacCabe and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith have each, in their different ways, insisted, 'stressing the capitalist character of modern cultural production is in itself neither optimistic nor pessimistic'.⁴⁹ The ideological significance of any text – or any genre – is always to be sought in a context-specific analysis. It cannot simply be deduced from the nature of the institution responsible for its production and circulation, nor can it ever be known in advance.

Both these theories, for all their differences, suffer from the fact that they pay little attention to aesthetics – for them form is always, and only, a wrapping for the cultural or ideological content in which they are almost exclusively interested. Insofar as they do discuss form, they tend to stress the repetitive, 'stereotypical' aspects of genres, setting aside the differences within and between them in order to provide themselves with a stable corpus, and in order to substantiate their underlying premise that the reasons for the popularity and longevity of genres are relatively uniform, as are, aside from a few Levi-Straussian antinomies, the genres themselves, the meanings they convey, and the culture (or ideology) that underpins them. While it may be the case that repetition is important, it is also the case, as we have seen, that variation and difference are crucial. Equally, while it may be the case that Hollywood genres are in most instances best considered as sub-genres of 'narrative film', and while these sub-genres may not be marked by the kinds of apparent discursive peculiarities that tend to differentiate the narrative film from documentary or the structuralist avant garde, there is still a great deal of scope for the investigation of specific discursive characteristics. Aside from my own attempt, in *Genre*, to explore the ways in which different genres exploit in different ways the features and characteristics of the narrative film (an attempt somewhat marred by an over-schematic approach, by a lack of attention to hybridization, and, above all, by a lack of attention to history), the basis for an approach can perhaps be found in the Russian Formalist idea that genres can each involve a 'dominant' (or dominating) aesthetic device (or ideological element).⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Altman *op cit* p 94

⁴⁷ Possibly the worst example I have come across is Judith Hess Wright's article, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo' in Barry Keith Grant *op cit*

⁴⁸ Colin MacCabe, Introduction to MacCabe (ed.) *High Theory/Low Culture: analysing popular television and film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) p 4

⁴⁹ Nowell-Smith *op cit* p 88

⁵⁰ See Tynyanov *op cit*

On this basis, particular genres can be characterized, not as the only genres in which given elements, devices and features occur, but as the ones in which they are dominant, in which they play an overall, organizing role

Approaches to individual genres – and to individual genre films – that draw centrally on the notion of a generic dominant are few and far between. However, it could be argued, for example, that the epic is marked by the dominance of spectacle; that the thriller and the detective genre, especially as discussed by Dennis Porter and Kristin Thompson, are dominated by the devices of suspense, narrative digression, and hermeneutic delay;⁵¹ and that, as the Russian Formalists themselves have argued, melodrama involves the subordination of all other elements ‘to one overriding aesthetic goal the calling forth of “pure,” “vivid” emotions’.⁵² In doing so, however, emphasis again must be placed on the fact that dominant elements are not necessarily exclusive elements, elements that occur only in the genre concerned. Clearly, spectacle, digression, suspense and the generation of passion and emotion are properties common to all Hollywood films.

By way of conclusion, I would like to stress the need for further research, further concrete and specific analyses, and for much more attention to be paid to genres hitherto neglected in genre studies, like the adventure film for example, the war film and the epic. In stressing this, I can do no better than to quote, for the last time, from Williams. In his own summation, he calls for a ‘return to film history’, for ‘genre studies with real historical integrity’.

This would mean 1) starting with a genre’s ‘pre-history’, its roots in other media, 2) studying all films, regardless of perceived quality; and 3) going beyond film content to study advertising, the star system, studio policy, and so on in relation to the production of films. (Williams, p. 124)

I would merely add that the scope of this investigation needs to be extended beyond individual genres to encompass specific generic regimes both inside, and outside, the cinema.

51 Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) esp. pp. 49–66.

52 Daniel Gerould, ‘Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama’, *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1978), p. 154.

Problems with quality

CHARLOTTE BRUNSDON

THE British government's 1988 White Paper, *Broadcasting in the '90s. Competition, Choice and Quality* (H.M.S.O., Cmd. 517), published shortly before the 'opening of the (British) skies' to satellite television has occasioned a rather unusual flurry of discussion about quality in television.¹ This seems to me both welcome and necessary. If, as a range of commentators have argued, one of the distinctive features of the White Paper is the disparity between its rhetorical aims, 'Competition, Choice and Quality', and its policy proposals then public intervention by those committed to values opposed by this government is essential, and may actively shape broadcasting in the 90s.² (In this connection, it is worth recalling that the sustained campaign by the Independent Film-makers Association prior to the setting up of Channel Four did have an effect on the eventual remit of the Channel, even though it may not have been quite what was desired.³)

The debate is currently joined mainly by 'interested parties' – broadcasters, the ITV companies, investors in satellite technology, etc. With broadcasting, however, we are all interested parties. My hypothesis here will be that 'progressive forces', particularly those working in the media/cultural studies fields, are severely handicapped in this debate by their eschewal of any interrogation of what is, and could be, meant by 'quality' in a discussion of television.⁴ 'Quality', for some good reasons, has become a bad word. The consequence of this is that only the most conservative ideas about quality are circulating, and will therefore win the day.

I want to examine some of the available discourses of judgement in relation to television, and to try very schematically to point to some of the difficulties of entering this debate, while still arguing

¹ See, for example 'Debate on the White Paper *Broadcasting in the 90s*, House of Commons, Hansard, 8 (February 1989) Broadcasting Research Unit, *Quality in Television* (London: John Libbey and Co. 1989). The leaflets and advertisements (national press, week beginning 12/6/89) of the Campaign for Quality Television Douglas Hurd's address to the Royal Television Society convention in Cambridge, Sept. 21 1989 and the subsequent coverage of this event – e.g. *The Guardian* Hurd denies TV quality faces threat', G. Henry 22/9/89, 'TV chiefs jockey for a lead in Hurd's big race' M. Leapman *The Independent* 27/9/89.

² Barry King, 'Introduction' *Screen* vol. 30, no. 1/2 (Winter–Spring 1989) pp. 2–5, Richard Collins, 'The White Paper on Broadcasting Policy' *ibid.* pp. 6–23. Stuart Prebble, 'White Lies' *The Listener* 17 November 1988, pp. 4–6. Phillip Whitehead 'Farewell Auntie' *New Statesman and Society*

11/11/88, pp 37–38, Christopher Dunkley 'More and more ways of communicating less' *The Financial Times*, 9/11/88, p 31, Alan Peacock 'Laying the foundations of consumer-driven broadcasting' *The Independent* 9/11/89 Brian Wenham, 'Any Questions?' *The Listener* 6 April 1989

3 See Simon Blanchard 'Where do new channels come from?' in S Blanchard and D Morley (eds) *What's this Channel Four?* (London: Comedia 1982), and Stephen Lambert, *Channel 4 – Television with a Difference?* (London: British Film Institute, 1982)

4 'Quality' has had a slightly polemical generic usage within television studies, as in the title of the book edited by Jane Feuer Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi *MTM Quality Television* (London: British Film Institute 1984) where the quotation marks indicate a certain self-consciousness about the usage on the part of the authors. This was clearly picked up in reviews with *The Times* giving Brian Appleyard's review of the book and accompanying season the subhead, 'Channel 4 and the NFT are taking mass American TV seriously' (1/12/84, p 11) and Susan Boyd-Bowman's review (*Screen* vol 26 no 6 (Nov–Dec 1985) pp 75–88) providing one of the few instances of the discussion of quality in this journal

5 Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction* (1979), trans Richard Nice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984)

that it should be entered. I don't have answers to the problems I raise, but the White Paper has given an urgency to the formulation of issues in the development of Film and Television Studies in this country with which I have been concerned for some time.

I want to start with the juxtaposition of different practices of judgement

Practical quality 1

Example (a)

My local paper offers the following star system guide for films broadcast on television

- **** Excellent
- *** Worth watching
- ** Video for a rainy day
- * Forget it

Example (b)

In the production folder which they have to submit with a completed project video, some students I was involved in examining pointed out that nothing in their three years of study of film and television theory had indicated to them the criteria which would be likely to be used in the assessment of their practical work. The examiners' discussion of the practical work was indeed marked by phrases which condensed aesthetic and professional assumptions, such as 'That's a nice bit of editing', 'Good use of sound', which one would be hard pressed to find in a volume of *Movies and Methods* or a copy of *Screen*. Our discussion of the student work was comparative and evaluative. We were concerned with the ambition and coherence of the original conception of each project, the organization across audio and visual channels and the effective execution of the work. And we did indeed have opinions. But they were not opinions, particularly in the judgement of the execution of the videos, that the project of *Screen* in the last fifteen or so years could be said to have much refined

These two instances of critical judgement in practice have similarities and differences. We could take the first as an abbreviated example of Bourdieu's 'barbaric' taste code, in that there is a clear notion of function at work, articulated through an exchange of time spent for pleasure gained.⁵ This is clear, not so much from the extremes of the one- and four-star classifications, but from the 'Worth' of three stars, where the expenditure of time is clearly weighed, where we are in fact warned that we will notice time passing, instead of forgetting time as in the 'Excellent' films –

'Quality television'?
page illustration from the
White Paper
(Courtesy of BBC, ITN/C4,
Picture Palace Productions,
and H.M.S.O.)



7. The news studio: ITN for Channel 4 News. Channels 3, 4 and 5 will all be expected to show high quality news in peak viewing periods (paragraphs 6.11, 6.13, 6.21, 6.23).



8. Filming an independent production on location (Picture Palace Productions Channel 4). The Government envisages that the role of independent producers will continue to grow (Chapter X).



9. BBC children's drama 'Chronicles of Narnia'. The continuing special role of BBC TV services is described in paragraph 3.2.

there will be longueurs, but in the end, it will be worth sticking with. In the two-star classification, the longueurs have left the television screen, and have moved into the viewer's life – 'a rainy day', from which the film may prove to be a distraction. So we have here that continuity between art and life, that demand that art should be useful, which Bourdieu sees as characteristic of the taste of the dominated classes. The particular use of film here is in its capacity to facilitate the forgetting of everyday life. This sense of weary time may also make it relevant to mention Conrad Lodziak's argument that it has been a mistaken endeavour for television and communication research to look to the analysis of television programmes to understand why people watch them.⁶ Instead, he argues, the statistical distribution of viewing can only be understood

⁶ Conrad Lodziak, *The Power of Television* (London: Francis Pinter, 1986)

within a wider grasp of the differential distribution of disposable income and time. Crudely, the people who watch most television are those who can't afford to do anything else.

Jostein Gripsrud makes a related point, in an account of research into the reception of *Dynasty* in Norway (although in a quite different argument) when he emphasizes that the international dominance of American television, and the production company's pre-broadcast publicity, rather than the specificities of the programme, could be seen as determinant in the success of the show:

. . . one might say that the introduction of *Dynasty* delivered a specific kind of *object* for an accumulated need or desire which in principle also might have been met by *other* conceivable objects, for instance an aesthetically and ideologically different form of serialized melodramatic saga.⁷

Both these arguments may serve to remind us that high viewing figures do not of themselves tell us much about how and why programmes are watched. They also return us to the idea of function, which is an essential element in any exercise of judgement. 'Commodities of the fancy' serve different needs and desires, from killing time to stretching fantasy, but the commodities which currently do this are not necessarily the only ones which could. While newspaper television guides would not be very useful if they were endlessly hankering after unmade films and serials, it is a different matter for legislators, programme makers and cultural analysts to construct policies which are based only on what is already on television, or to take the 'having been watched-ness' of a programme as a guarantee of the spirit in which it was watched.

The evaluation of student practical work is institutionally quite different. The exercise is located within Higher Education, one of the sites of the production of difference in taste codes, where what is most valued, in Bourdieu's argument, is that which is located furthest from the realm of necessity, or obvious function. The students were correct to point out that (non-practical) Film and Television Studies orthodoxy in the British academy rarely explicitly engages with issues of critical evaluation, except perhaps politically in the varied guises and defences of the 'progressive' and the 'popular'. The evacuation of the explicit discussion of value does not of course mean that value is not taught. The turmoil over the canon in Literary Studies was precisely a dispute about the institutionalization of value judgements in syllabuses, courses and anthologies, an institutionalization which requires no one, at any stage, to say explicitly 'white anglo-american male writers are best because . . .'.⁸

7 Jostein Gripsrud, 'Watching vs Understanding *Dynasty*' paper presented to the 1988 International Television Studies Conference, London, pp. 7-8

8 Frank Kermode offers a germane discussion of the literary canon and 30s writing in *History and Value* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988). The debate in the USA over the canon/the Humanities which has been partly provoked by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) continues: see *Speaking for the Humanities* by George Levin, Peter Brooks, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Garber, E. Ann Kaplan and Catharine R. Stimpson (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper no. 7, 1988).

The terrain is slightly more rugged in Film and Television Studies because both media attract mass audiences, while their novelty and their industrial and technological infrastructures have functioned to disqualify them from the status of art. Thus the historical debates of Film Studies – ‘Is film an art form?’ ‘In what does the essence or specificity of the medium inhere?’ ‘Should the director be seen as auteur?’ – are partly debates about the extent to which the new medium can be understood within the traditional frameworks for the discussion of high art. Television Studies faces even greater difficulties, particularly since the origins of much television scholarship lie in Sociology and Mass Communications. The consequence of simply annexing film and television to traditional aesthetic discourse is to do extraordinary violence to any inclusive understanding of the media. This is the case, for example, when television is reduced to its plays and literary adaptations, and subjected to a sort of sub-literary criticism. The recalcitrance of these media (also apparent, of course with photography) to traditional aesthetic discourse means that any canons are peculiarly hybrid.⁹ It has also been one of the causes of quite fundamental transformation in aesthetic discourse, from ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ to the dissolution of all distinctions in postmodernity – but that is another story. Here, my point is that the hybrid and unstable canons of Film Studies could have led to the foregrounding of issues of taste, judgement and value in the discipline, but that, if anything, the move has been in the opposite direction, with these issues becoming increasingly illegitimate. The case is more pronounced in Television Studies, where texts that could form the canon are often ephemeral, and pre-video history is hard to come by. The marked populism which has partly sustained the discipline in recent years in Britain, which I discuss below, has contributed to a refusal of anything other than political evaluation.

To make my argument convincing, I do, at this stage, need to construct a full history of the institutionalization of Film and Television Studies in this country, written with a history of criticism in these fields, and the changing theoretical paradigms of the humanities, within a broader political history. I cannot offer this here, with its necessary attention to key books like *The Popular Arts* and *The Long Revolution*, or to journals like *Sequence*, *Movie* and latterly *Screen*.¹⁰ Such a history would also chart the particular pressures exercised by the demand to demonstrate that the popular entertainment media are worthy of study, and the key, but different roles of Sociology and English in establishing a base; the influence of continental philosophical traditions on disciplines anxious to prove their difference from simple ‘reviewing’; the importance of the British Film Institute’s Education Department; the political impulse to study popular, not elite forms, to affirm that ‘culture is

9 With cinema, for example the canons deducible from works like Christopher Lyons *International Dictionary of Films* (London: Firethorn Press [Waterstone’s] 1984) are part print availability, part technological/industrial history, part stars/directors/producers/studios etc. See also Janet Staiger, *The Politics of Film Canons*, *Cinema Journal* vol. 24 no. 3 (Spring 1985), pp. 4–23.

10 Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel *The Popular Arts* (London: Pantheon Books 1964) and Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus 1961). The history this article needs is perhaps, above all, the history of the changing attitudes to, and meanings of television in Britain. Most obviously relevant is the introduction of commercial television in 1955, and the preceding campaigns such as those of The Popular Television Association and The National Television Council. Particularly interesting are the clear splits in the establishment attested to by all commentators: for example H.H. Wilson *Pressure Group* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961); Peter Black *The Mirror in the Corner* (London:

Hutchinson 1972) *The Independent* reminded its readers of this history in a leader 'Maintaining Quality Television' (18/6/89), but generally the debates of the 50s have not been much referenced. Charles Barr traces changing attitudes to commercial television in the late fifties and early sixties also arguing that the Pilkington Report of 1962 (which led to the establishment of BBC2) was crucial in recruiting commercial television to the public service ethos (Charles Barr 'Screens within screens' in Barr (ed.) *All Our Yesterdays* (London: BFI 1986)).

- 11 Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams 'Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture' in Richard Collins et al. (eds.) *Media Culture and Society: a critical reader* (London: Sage, 1986). John Frow, 'Accounting for tastes: some problems in Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture' *Cultural Studies* vol 1 no 1 (Jan 1987).

ordinary', the general shift away from explicitly evaluative criticism in both Britain and the US; and the significance of the increasing employment market in audio-visual industries in underpinning growth in the study of the media. All I can offer here, however, is an hypothesis that it is the semi-institutionalization of Film and Television Studies which makes them exciting to teach, but that this novelty has its own paradoxes.

I can briefly expand this point by using Bourdieu's ideas to argue about the origins of Film and Television Studies as disciplines. I am aware that there are problems with Bourdieu's formulations, particularly (ironically, for my argument) around his positive valuation of dominated taste.¹¹ I am more interested in the overall shape of an argument than whether it is watertight – I'm sure there are lots of holes. I am also aware that Film and Television Studies in this country has developed in more than one way and differs accordingly. The attraction of teaching film was that it seemed to offer relevance and engagement to students. Precisely because it was not a legitimate subject, there was a chance of involving in discussion students who were normally bored or passive. For the purposes of the present argument, it was because students often held strong opinions about films – films, as opposed, for instance, to the Romantic Poets, represented a 'felt' realm of value – that films were attractive to teachers anxious to develop literacy, articulacy and powers of argument and analysis. But of course, to learn these things – to learn from films – this original value laden universe must be left. It is functional as the point of engagement, but once discussion is joined, new skills must be learnt, so that personal disagreements can be explored in impersonal ways. In Bourdieu's terms, only the student who learns to make the transition from barbarous to pure taste has truly learnt. As with the individual, so with the discipline.

I am not arguing that we should re-write our syllabuses to re-install evaluative criticism as our central concern, but I do think we should pay some attention to the concealed ways in which we are teaching evaluation, and I feel an increasing concern about the types of orthodoxy which are developing in the as yet relatively young disciplines of Film, Television and Cultural Studies. Theoretical work which in the early seventies was enabling, allowing students and teachers to see how their disciplines were constituted, is now installed in place of those critical orthodoxies which it once described and assaulted. Concepts like 'hegemony' are exercised hegemonically in Higher Education syllabuses. 'Bourgeois ideology', long banished by *Screen*, is dutifully deployed by students who want to work in advertising. The attack on liberalism, and the philosophical dispatch of humanism which accompanied much of the embrace of what in the US is simply called 'Theory' have all too frequently involved a blindness to institutional power. As I have

12 Recent relevant discussions of the issue of value in television include David Thorburn, 'Television as an Aesthetic Medium', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, no. 4 (1987) pp 161–173; Caren J Deming 'The Feminization of Television Criticism', in J Anderson (ed.) *Communication Yearbook* no. 11 (Newbury Park Sage 1988); John Caughie, 'On the Offensive: Television and Values' in D Lusted and P Drummond (eds.) *Television and Schooling* (London: British Film Institute and Institute of Education, 1985); Kim Christian Schrader 'Cultural Quality: Search for a Phantom?', paper delivered to the 1988 International Television Studies Conference, London.

argued above, the absence of a canon that can be argued to be sanctified by centuries does not mean that judgements are not made, and the disciplines are sufficiently mature to have some explicit discussion about the history of criticism and the type of criteria in play. The fact that many of the impulses which propel the study of popular forms such as film and television also involve the repudiation of the class and cultural privileges which partly constitutes the history of high art (and thus aesthetic discourse) does not mean that judgements cannot be made on grounds other than the political.¹² It is not the exercise of judgement which is oppressive, but the withholding of its grounds and the consequent incapacitating of opponents and alternative positions. We do not defeat the social power which presents certain critical judgements as natural and inevitable by refusing to make critical judgements.

Subjective factors

As the very title of the White Paper includes the word quality, some attempts at definition have had to be made. The recognition of what are generally referred to as 'subjective factors' have, however, proved a powerful inhibition. I want to look here at some of available contemporary discourses in which quality figures, and as a preliminary, I should like to attempt to unpick what is at stake in the notion of 'subjective factors', a notion which is often used to explain why there are disagreements about what would constitute quality in television. The type of usage I have in mind is exemplified by the report from *The Independent* (15/6/89), in which there is a discussion of the possible legal ramifications of a quality requirement in the award of franchises. The imagined conjunction of legal and aesthetic discourse raises interesting issues, and (*contra* the views expressed in this report) is not without precedent: there are affiliations with both obscenity law (artistic merit) and compensation cases (loss of quality of life awards – so much for a limb, a sense, a spouse). What I wish to do here though, is to argue that there are always issues of power at stake in notions such as quality and judgement – Quality for whom?, Judgement by whom?, On whose behalf? – and that in certain instances the invocation of subjective factors (personal taste, preference, subjective judgement) as the ground on which judgements of quality cannot be generalized blurs the role of structural and institutional factors in the formation of these judgements.

'Subjective factors', which propose an equality of subjectivity for all individuals, are mobilized within a culture/society in which there is a differential distribution of the possibilities and capacities for individuals to generalize about personal tastes. So some subjective factors seem more subjective than others.

Legal fights likely over 'quality' TV

By Simon Midgley

MEDIA lawyers are likely to have a field day arguing over what is and is not "quality" television, if the Government's newly-amended proposals to deregulate broadcasting become law.

Douglas Hurd, the Home Secretary, has announced significant changes in the White Paper on Broadcasting. The proposal to auction commercial television licences for Channel 3, the replacement for ITV, in the early 1990s to the highest bidder is to be modified, with the aim of protecting programme quality and diversity.

The Government's safeguards include a higher minimum programme standard or "quality threshold" for franchise applicants and payment of a performance bond to the proposed Independent Television Commission to guarantee programme promises are fulfilled.

The ITC will be able to impose a sizeable fine — of several million pounds in the case of the larger commercial television companies — if companies renege on undertakings.

Richard Dunn, chairman of the ITV Association and managing director of Thames TV, warned yesterday that media lawyers might well have a field day defining "quality" television.

The amended White Paper says that applicants for each Channel 3 station must now commit themselves to providing "a reasonable proportion of programmes (in addition to news and current affairs) of high quality, and a diverse programme service calculated to appeal to a wide variety of tastes and interests." Mr Dunn

said: "Will a performance bond really crack the problem? I have my doubts. How much will it be? Is it returnable? What do you get knocked off for providing a less than high quality current affairs programme?"

"Media lawyers will have a field day defining 'quality'. You cannot specify quality. How do you do it? How do you have a discussion in a law court about whether one hour of documentary is better than another? It is just a total waste of the judiciary's time." The ITC, he said, would have the responsibility for defining what is quality and diversity. Its decisions, he added, would be challengeable at law.

Another television industry observer said. "If you are going to fine somebody large sums of money then they will no doubt take you to court. You will have to convince the court that something wrong has been done. This will be difficult to do unless you have actually specified what was right."

Subjective criteria for judging programme quality would not do. The ITC will have to incorporate some kind of quantitative, enforceable provision in the franchise holders' licence conditions, he said. "I think this is wonderful stuff. Big City lawyers are going to be coining it."

Gordon Hughes, professor of economics at Edinburgh University, said defining "quality" television was a problem that had eluded solution anywhere.

The Independent, 15/6/89
(with permission)

This first point, which does not stand alone, can be exemplified by the much parodied British upperclass usage of the pronoun 'one' where less privileged individuals would offer 'I'. In this grammatical practice we see laid out for us a world in which certain forms of subjectivity exist in an impersonal, universalizing form. This 'objective subjectivity' is paralleled by the invocation of transcendent and universal values within aesthetic discourse to produce a pantheon of great works over the ages.¹³

I don't at all want to deny that different individuals do have different tastes. As Simon Frith has argued in relation to popular music, these tastes are experienced as integral parts of the individual's identity.¹⁴ But in addition to this recognition we need to articulate both a sociology of taste — there are demonstrable links between social origins/position/trajectory and taste sets (a fact that advertisers have had no difficulty with for many years) — and the existence of more and less arcane hierarchies of taste in every

¹³ Janet Wolff *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), provides a lucid summary of the range of positions on transcendent and contingent value.

¹⁴ Simon Frith 'Towards an aesthetic of popular music' in Leppart and McClary (eds) *Music and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

cultural field. As Bourdieu's work indicates, particularly his 'topographies' of distinctions made in cultural fields, these hierarchies, which are at their most elaborated in art forms with long histories – music, rather than cinema, for example – have an existence independent of subjective factors. Thus most people in Western culture know that classical music is higher up the music hierarchy than reggae, whatever their personal tastes, or indeed their opinions about this ranking. In the contexts of taste provided by these hierarchies certain taste formations appear more eccentric – subjective – than others. To have preferences which run against the hierarchy involves people in endless self-justification ('I know its rubbish but . . .'¹⁵), or else in the polemical assertions of other hierarchies (reggae as part of an international black music . . .). These assertions and justifications, in their very elaboration, reveal themselves as non-dominant, subjective, judgements.¹⁶ Speaking from the periphery requires more discussion of place than speaking from the centre, where it can be taken for granted.¹⁷

So my first point is that there is more than one form of inequality between the subjects of subjective factors, and that there is more than one reason why some judgements are perceived as more subjective than others.

I would like immediately to juxtapose my unease with the formulation 'subjective factors' (a suspicion that it often involves the suppression of structural features) with a coinage of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's which may be more useful. In the context of a discussion about ideas of value within literary studies, and an argument to establish the radical contingency of all aesthetic value, Herrnstein Smith uses the notion of 'folk-relativism'

It may be noted that the latter – that is, the normative mechanisms within a community that suppress divergence and tend to obscure as well as deny the contingency of value – will always have, as their counterpart, a *countermechanism* that permits a recognition of that contingency and a more or less genial acknowledgement of the inevitability of divergence, hence the ineradicability, in spite of the efforts of establishment axiology, of what might be called folk-relativism 'Chacun à son gout'; 'De gustibus . . .'; 'One man's meat is another's poison'; and so forth.¹⁸

The advantage of this formulation is that it is philosophically clearer with its invocation of relativism, and incorporates notions of power, although in a consciously archaic mode, in the use of 'folk'. Herrnstein Smith's definition makes plain that she understands the proverbs she quotes as bearing witness to the social and practical necessity of recognizing different tastes in daily life. What I want to do is to dance on the pinhead which I think I can discern in the abyss of relativism. I want to argue that the debate about quality

15 Nearly all the recent ethnographic work with female audiences about their television watching reveals this awareness of taste hierarchies and the clear assignment of their own personal taste to a very lowly position, one which is inhabited in ways ranging from the defiant to the self-ridiculing. See for example Ellen Seiter, Gabriele Kreutzner, Eva Maria Warth and Hans Borchers 'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive' in E. Seiter et al. (eds.) *Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 1989).

16 Clyde Taylor provides a trenchant critique of the aesthetic enterprise as such in relation to the Afro-American tradition in 'Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic era' in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds.), *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989) pp. 90–110.

17 Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'De Margin and De Centre' introduction to 'The Last Special Issue on Race?' *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1988) pp. 2–10.

18 Barbara Herrnstein Smith 'Contingencies of Value', in Robert von Hallberg (ed.) *Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. 21.

must be joined, not because dominant criteria of judgement are correct (or indeed that oppositional criteria, were we able to formulate them, would carry any objective guarantee), nor because texts necessarily have an ahistorical, intrinsic value, but precisely because outside certain very limited fields, dominant criteria are in chaos, and because it is through debate and institutionalization of ideas in, for instance, laws and courses, that ideas of quality are established. That there are no guarantees should function, not to inhibit discussion, but to predispose us to the promotion of variety and diversity as the single most important principle to extend and preserve – variety and diversity, that is, of both production and audiences. The extent to which this requires that certain sorts of programme-making be protected from the imperatives of the market place is one of the key issues for policy debates. Of equal importance is the question of the extent to which this type of protection can be extended in ways that are not paternalistic. These debates about policy cannot be entered without attention to the separate, but necessarily related issue of cultural value.

¹⁹ See Herrnstein Smith for this argument

If we take as a starting point the idea that relationships between classification and function are a necessary element in the process of judgement¹⁹ – something that we all do whenever we channel hop in search of an image or sound which we can identify as likely, or most likely, to satisfy – then it is clear that television, as a domestic medium, offers an enormous range of possibilities. Flicking through channels searching for something to watch involves a very speedy placing of images and sounds into generic classes.

Sometimes the identification may be more specific – a particular personality, actor or show – but the generic recognition is immediately functional: ‘talk show, no, news, no, ad, maybe . . .’. Classification shapes expectation and allows judgement of the extent to which certain functions are being fulfilled. Sometimes the decision to stay with, or return to a channel is made because it is not immediately clear what type of programme it is. Only after it is generically identified do we make the decision to stay or go, and there can often be a second decision as in ‘Sit-com yes (pause) . . . but not this sit-com, unless there is nothing better’. Here textual classification exists with contingent and personal functions for the audience member – the type of satisfaction any particular individual is looking for at any particular time. Thus the rejected sit-com may be watched because alternatives are generically or specifically unacceptable, even if, on traditional or professional criteria, the alternatives may be ‘better’. There is a way in which ‘folk-relativism’ offers a model for desirable television schedules – the provision of a range of possibilities, of something for everyone all the time. Certainly propaganda for the proposed legislation stresses

increased opportunities for choice (This seems clearly desirable – whether it is likely is another matter.) My point, though, is that individual audience members (when they are able to) make their own judgements of quality, and that these are often highly context bound and radically contingent. The proper place for notions such as, ‘All judgements of quality are subjective’, is not as the justification for abandoning attempts to differentiate between programmes, but as a reason why there should be a wide variety of different types of programmes to choose from.

There are thus two points to make. Firstly, as the broadcasters themselves argue, the generic diversity of television must be taken into account in discussions of quality, but not in ways which makes quality ‘genre specific’, creating certain ‘sink’ or ‘trash’ genres of which demands are not made. Secondly, that in answer to the question, ‘To what is the judgement of quality to be ascribed?’, we should privilege the overall provision rather than individual programmes.

Discourses of quality

What is of interest when thinking about established canons and criteria of value in relation to television is partly the novelty of the medium, and partly its dependence on other art forms. It is this novelty – and the accompanying absence of an institutionally and academically ratified tradition and a history – which contributes to, for example, the legal quagmire predicted above. I doubt there would be quite the same problem if judgement was sought on the relative quality of Mozart and Bros. I don’t mean to dismiss fifty odd years of programme making at a stroke – but compared with Milton Studies, sit-com studies has a long way to go in terms of institutional presence. I have argued at more length elsewhere about television’s peculiar place in relation to established aesthetic discourse.²⁰ It is both excluded from these discourses, and formed by them. Thus jostling to define quality television we have several main contenders which can be outlined schematically.

Traditional aesthetic discourse. This tends, for obvious reasons, to concentrate on televised opera, dance, drama and music, with excursions to arts magazines or profiles.²¹ There are conservative and avant-garde variants of this strategy and I discuss the former in the section *Brideshead in the Crown* below.

Professional codes and practices. These are highly internally differentiated. While I cannot discuss them here fully, available

²⁰ C. Brunson ‘Problems of Aesthetics and Audiences’ in P. Mellencamp (ed.) *Logics of Television* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990)

²¹ John Ellis ‘Art, Culture and Quality – Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and the Seventies’ [*Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1978), pp. 9–14] provides a particularly interesting tracing of traditional aesthetic criteria and the cinema in the 1940s in which ‘quality’ figured significantly

- ²² For the institutional evaluative codes of the BBC see Tom Burns, *The BBC Public Institution and Private World* (London and Basingstoke Macmillan 1977), for Channel 4 much material is broadcaster authored, as in John Ellis, 'Channel 4 – Working Notes', *Screen*, vol 24 no 6 (Nov–Dec 1983) pp 37–51. Andrew Higson discusses the relationship of professionalism and innovation in a review of books on Channel Four, 'A Wee Trendy Channel', *Screen* vol 30, nos 1–2 (1989) pp 80–91. Programme studies often provide examples of 'professional aesthetics' e.g. Manuel Alvarado and Edward Buscombe *Hazell the making of a TV series* (London BFI/Latimer 1978).
- ²³ See 'Ideological Criticism of Television Technical Manuals', *Screen Education* no 12 (Autumn, 1974) pp 37–45.
- ²⁴ Melvyn Bragg 'Closedown for the Golden Age', edited text of Channel Four *Opinions* 9/3/89 printed in *The Guardian*, 9/3/89 pp 25–27. 'Theory and Practice', Charles Wood, Linda Agran, Melvyn Bragg, Tim Delaney, Alan Yentob and Aubrey Singer on the White Paper in *The Listener* 17/11/88. Anna Home 'The wolf at the door of children's TV' *The Independent*, 19/7/89.
- ²⁵ I do not discuss realist paradigms fully here but see Terry Lovell *Pictures of Reality* (London British Film Institute 1980).
- ²⁶ C. Brunson and D. Morley *Everyday Television Nationwide* (London British Film Institute 1978).
- ²⁷ Christine Geraghty 'No common ground', *Screen* vol 24 nos 4–5 (1983) provides an interesting discussion of soap opera and realist conventions.
- ²⁸ Paddy Scannell, 'The Communicative Ethos in Broadcasting', paper to the 1988

production studies allow us to hypothesize that there would be institutional and generic differentiations (BBC, ITV, Channel Four; current affairs, soaps, light entertainment, etc.), with very fine appreciations of what has been achieved with what production constraints in what circumstances.²² Within these differentiations, I think it is possible to separate out some key hierarchies and sites of judgement. Thus there are generic hierarchies in which current affairs programmes are 'more important' than soaps, and ratings can signify 'quality', or its opposite. Much of British television is dominated by a sub-naturalist aesthetic which seems to be partly function-led (crudely, good sound is clear sound).²³ This category also encompasses more strictly technical discussions which condense aesthetic assumptions – for example, the relative virtues of film and video for drama production, or the innovatory use, in 1982, of steadicam in *Brookside*. The trade magazines are a main source for the establishing of the main contours and changes in these discourses. The involvement of broadcasters in the Campaign for Quality Television has provided one site where these discourses have been given a more public form.²⁴

Realist paradigms. By this I mean the discussion of anything from news bulletins to sport in which key criteria are those of adequacy, objectivity, immediacy.²⁵ This paradigm is used by professionals, 'the general public' and academics. Thus, for example, much work in mass communications research and television studies is within this paradigm: 'Is the news biased?' 'Does it show us only effects not causes?', etc. I would see the work of the Media Studies Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, including the *Nationwide* work, as being mainly within this paradigm.²⁶ Criticism of the 'representation' of particular social groups (striking miners, working class communities in soap operas, black characters in crimes series) is also frequently within this paradigm.²⁷ Thus although its philosophical home is with non-fiction programming, it is frequently the central critical criterion used in discussion of fiction programmes, and is one of the dominant common-sense aesthetics of this culture – as in 'But I come from the East End, and it's not a bit like Walford'.

Entertainment and leisure codes. These are more difficult to locate, mainly because of their lack of elaborated legitimacy. This lack of legitimacy may be due to the fact that many of these judgements are made casually, in speech, rather than in writing. Paddy Scannell touches on this in his discussion of 'The Communicative Ethos in Broadcasting' when he discusses the social currency of the question, 'Did you see?'²⁸ Ien Ang, discussing the role and pleasure of fantasy

²⁹ Ien Ang 'Melodramatic
Identifications: Television Fiction
and Women's Fantasy', in Mary
Ellen Brown (ed.), *Television and
Women's Culture* (Sydney:
Currency Press, 1989)

³⁰ Richard Dyer, *Light Entertainment*
(BFI Television Monograph no. 2
1973), 'Taking Popular Television
Seriously', in D. Lusted and P.
Drummond (eds.), *Television and
Schooling* (London: BFI and
Institute of Education, 1985)

³¹ John Ellis (1978) *op cit.*,
discusses the moral resonance of
realist arguments, the way in
which 'the real is primarily a
moral imperative' (p. 28) in
British critical discourse in the
1940s

in television viewing opens one way of approaching areas quite untouched by political and realist criteria.²⁹ Richard Dyer, whose work on utopia uses non-psychoanalytic frameworks has consistently tried to address light entertainment, as has Andy Medhurst in his columns in *The Listener*.³⁰ What has perhaps produced more comment is the way in which these codes are increasingly being collapsed into and constructed as the practices of consumption, and so magazines like *Marxism Today* have become associated with notions of culture as 'enlightened consumption' I attempt a preliminary excavation of some of the criteria in use by looking at the newspaper television guides below

Moral paradigms. Here I would locate the famous imperatives of public service broadcasting, notions of impartiality and the justification of censorship and controls on broadcasting. It is this discursive formation which is partly in crisis in the White Paper, as others have observed, because of the contradictions between views of the citizen inscribed within the notions of the Broadcasting Standards Council, and that of the citizen as consumer. Historically, moral arguments are often presented as, or justified by, realist ones.³¹ Although this strategy is present within the document, one of the noticeable features of the White Paper, as with the Peacock report, is the way in which the moral arguments are conducted as arguments about consumer protection:

Programmes should not offend against good taste or decency, or be likely to encourage or incite to crime or lead to disorder, or be offensive to public feeling . . . The consumer protection obligations need to be properly enforced so that the quality of programming is maintained and the power of television and radio is not abused. (para. 7.2)

This typology allows us to see quite clearly that the White Paper offers only realist and moral discussion of 'quality' television, and that discussion is brief. The relevant paragraphs are 6.10 and 6.11, which deal with the regime for Channel 3, and, by extension, channel 5, paragraphs 6.23–6.27 which deal with Channel 4 (and may have already been modified); and chapter 7, which deals with the Broadcasting Standards Council. The problem is not so much that the White Paper *should* specify what quality television will be – in current circumstances the less said probably the better. Rather the problem lies in conceiving of cultural texts solely or primarily in moral or realist terms which remove the possibility of what we might call 'the aesthetic defence'. To give an example: there is a scene of 'explicit sex' in *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1987) which was objected to as obscene. The scene was defended on the grounds that it was part of an aesthetic whole, and that it was therefore

inappropriate to isolate it. Whatever we may feel about the scene, the play, or the cultural assumptions which underpin the defence, we should also be concerned that such an 'aesthetic defence', given the remit of the Broadcasting Standards Council, may not be available in the future. This has implications for the future of innovative work on television – which is of course going to be under stress anyway.

Practical quality 2

It is in this context that we can move to a discussion of some of the ways in which judgements of quality are made about television.

a) *Newspapers the broadcast schedules*

Newspaper and journal reviewing, sensible places to start when thinking about the critical judgements made about television, have been substantially discussed in this journal by Mike Poole and John Caughie, and more briefly elsewhere by Kathy Myers and Colin McArthur. Critics such as Clive James also offer some comment on their role and practice in collections of their work.³² McArthur makes the point (in 1980) that the function of television reviewing is less clear than that of film and theatre reviewing, in that reviews usually appear after one transmission: 'Given the absence of a clear use-value', he says, 'the strong tendency . . . towards personality flashing is writ large in the television columns of both the popular and the heavy press.' (p. 59)

The increased use of the VCR in the 1980s may have increased the use value of reviews since this was written, but it is still the case that clearly 'voiced' comment is typical of much television criticism. I want here to look briefly at what is often offered as a less voiced coverage of television, the broadcast schedules in the daily press.

The star system discussed at the beginning of this article is a fairly typical approach to the classification of films shown on television within the British tabloid press, with the *Star* offering a rather enterprising one star classification, 'Ring up and complain'. Of broadcast material, only films get this symbolic evaluation (although *The Sunday Correspondent* has started life with ticks for approved television programmes). The assessment of television programmes occurs sometimes in the listings and sometimes in a separately boxed daily selection.

I want to examine the assumptions and values found in these listings. I have worked with the weekday press only, choosing Friday as my sampling day, and the survey has no pretence at rigour. I was interested in the listings, rather than the reviews, because there is a clear aim to provide information about what is on, while the listings compiler is also usually expected to provide details or comments.

³² Mike Poole, 'The Cult of the Generalist – British Television Criticism 1936–83', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1984), pp. 41–61. John Caughie, 'Television criticism: "A discourse in search of an object"', *Screen*, vol. 25, nos. 4–5 (1984), pp. 109–120. Colin McArthur, 'Point of Review: Television Criticism in the Press', *Screen Education*, no. 35 (Summer 1980), pp. 59–61. Kathy Myers, 'Television previewers – no critical comment', in Len Masterman (ed.), *Television Mythologies* (London: Comedia, 1984). For Clive James, see the introduction to his third collection of television criticism, *Glued to the Box* (London: Picador, 1983).

which will allow the readers of that particular newspaper to make their viewing selection. I refer to the newspapers by size as tabloids or broadsheets, recognizing that *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* are not generally considered connotational tabloids, and that 'tabloid' carries associations usually matched by referring to the broadsheet press as 'the quality press' For obvious reasons that name won't do here

The tabloids generally separate films from the broadcast schedules (partly because of network schedule differences, and their commitment to comment on all available films) and offer one or two sentence synopses, usually with some evaluation. *The Sun*, which keeps film comment within the schedules, offers a 'Sun-rating', which is often alliterative, as in, for *The Day it Came to Earth*, 'More of a hoot than a horror', or 'Hairy hot-rod action' for *Burnout* (25/8/89). Tabloid layout often places the Film Guide box with the news of video releases, frequently on a page with a general show biz emphasis, facing the schedules. *Today* provides bar codes for timer video recording of films, programme details for cable television, and gives the most space to satellite programmes. The space given to satellite programmes exemplifies the way in which page layout condenses complex interrelations of reader profile, corporate ownership and aesthetic evaluation. Thus while it is not surprising, given Murdoch's ownership, that *The Times* is the only broadsheet to give full satellite details (only *The Guardian*, with its high media profile, of the other broadsheets even mentions satellite), it is not immediately predictable that it should be *Today*, rather than *The Sun* (also owned by Murdoch) which should give most tabloid space

The television and radio schedules, then, their place within the newspaper, the detail and typeface used, testify to a series of assumptions about the place and function of broadcasting within the readers' lives (and the ownership of the newspapers). Thus, on the one hand, *The Financial Times* offers a small section of its Arts page, with brief complete listings, in very small print, of the four terrestrial channels, and more extended daily television selections, usually by a 'name' critic, Christopher Dunkley. It offers no listings for Radio One or Radio Scotland but the World Service is given in full. *The Sun* on the other hand, gives programme listings for BBC2 and Channel 4 in a smaller type face and space than that for BBC1 and ITV, and with a more cramped spacing than that used for the main Sky channels. There are no radio listings. In general terms, the tabloid press tend to stretch BBC1 and ITV, shrinking BBC2 and Ch 4, while the broadsheets may give equal column length to all channels, but are rather cavalier with ITV regions.

Throughout the tabloid treatment of both films on television and the television schedules, there is a fairly snappy feel to the judgements being made. Television is placed within a wider

entertainment/show biz context, but in choosing viewing, whether broadcast or pre-recorded, the reader is encouraged and expected to make choices. This exercise of (consumer) power can be contrasted to the role of witness or eavesdropper offered in much of the show biz coverage in the same papers, where the reader is the recipient of gossip about stars and shows.

There seems to be a fairly clear notion of function in these television guides. The reader wants to make choices that will result in the most enjoyable viewing, and the central criterion seems to be 'Does this entertain in recognizably pleasurable ways?' For feature films, there is a relatively limited code, the most significant recurring elements of which are 'over-rated', 'far-fetched', 'zany' and 'touching'. 'Touching' seems clearly gender coded, while 'over-rated' (used for example of *Chariots of Fire* by *Today*, 1/9/89) signals the disparity between wider critical reputation and that paper's readers. It is precisely this type of targeted aesthetic judgement which is useful to readers – so long as it proves accurate. The same kind of specific address is also apparent in *The Independent*, where what is repeatedly revealed is ambivalence about entertainment television. This appears through a rather dead pan reproduction of programme synopses in a context which makes them read like pastiches of the same details in the popular press. Obviously, to draw any conclusions, it would be necessary to conduct research over a long period, with attention to any types of patterning that might recur in the giving of details and judgements: patterns of channel preferences, genres, slots, and evaluative terms. The point here is that different taste codes and expectations of television are daily inscribed in newspapers in ways that casually employ targeted, but rather mixed criteria of judgement. If the government, in the White Paper, speaks mainly of television in moral and realist terms, potential 'consumers' are given information in ways which mix discourses of leisure, conventional aesthetics and a little bit of realism.

b) *Brideshead in the Crown*

One of the ways of side-stepping the difficult critical arguments about quality television, while still being able to attest to its existence and virtue is to refer to specific programmes, which can then function as shorthand for taken for granted understandings of 'quality'.

Thames Television used and parodied this strategy in the series of full page advertisements in the national press in July and August which declared, 'To celebrate our 21st anniversary, we're going to be re-showing several of our better programmes over the next few weeks', below full page images from named shows. The ads clearly seek national popular recognition for Thames as the originator of successful and remembered programmes, as well as making a bid for

a definition of quality which includes funny, audience pulling programmes within a notion of diversity – all human life is here in (on) the two sides of Thames. Thus in the ad which uses a still from *Bless this House* (Thames, 1971–), the headline, ‘Throughout our programme-making history, Thames Television have always been involved in serious social issues’ is placed above a very *Carry On* image of Sid James holding up a bra. In a way, the ad recruits Sid James, and that whole tradition of British comedy, to say ‘Bras to (franchise winning) serious social issues’. Simultaneously it provides a very heterosexual cover for a plug for one of Thames’s award winning plays, *The Naked Civil Servant* (Thames, 1975) which, as the ad reminds us, ‘dealt with homosexuality’.

It is unusual, outside professional discourses, for popular

**THROUGHOUT OUR PROGRAMME-MAKING HISTORY,
THAMES TELEVISION HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INVOLVED IN
SERIOUS SOCIAL ISSUES.**



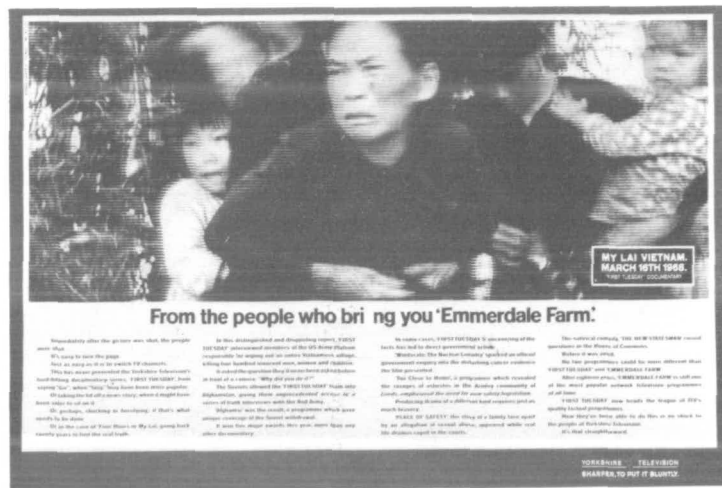
(Courtesy of Thames
Television)

Over the last 24 years, Thames have written and produced many TV programmes, some of the funniest of genre change and some bringing up the real.
All the funniest were genre programmes like *The Naked Civil Servant* which dealt with homosexuality.
At Thames we're serious about the issues. We're serious about the issues on which the nation has been - made us all laugh.



To celebrate our 24th anniversary, we're going to be re-broadcasting several of our better programmes over the next few weeks.
Including both the programmes mentioned above - with *The Naked Civil Servant* on tonight at 9.30 pm.
Because you shouldn't show one side of Thames without also showing the other.

programmes such as *Bless this House* to function as synonyms for quality, and here it is precisely the juxtaposition with *The Naked Civil Servant*, producing a transaction of symptomatic significance in which each covers for the other. *The Naked Civil Servant* is of course a much more traditional choice (single play, name adaptation of known author, professional recognition) to signify quality. By placing together the popular and the esoteric the ad gives us quality as variety. This 'quality as variety' strategy is recurrent with the ITV companies, with the national ITV ads, 'ITV? It's all game shows and soaps', in March 1989 (*The Independent* 8/3/89), and the current (Oct 1989) Granada ads, which use a headline 'From the people who bring you *Emmerdale Farm*' below an image of a family fleeing from the My Lai massacre taken from a Yorkshire documentary.



(Courtesy of Young and Rubicam)

More commonly, to signify quality the single play is invoked alone, often as 'The Wednesday Play' (which dates the legislator's interest in television). Other programmes too have functioned historically – *Civilisation*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Cathy Come Home*, but the recent debate has seen two programmes repeatedly invoked to carry the meaning of quality television: *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada, 1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (Granada, 1984). Thus with a blithe disregard for production companies (there is a significant and common misattribution of the two programmes to the BBC), the attack on the White Paper by John Mortimer in *The Mail on Sunday* 13/11/89, under a trail declaring 'White Paper is death sentence for the BBC' was headed 'Selling off television's jewels in the crown'. Alan Coren, in a column in *The Times* (10/11/88) which satirically welcomed the White Paper pointed to the ubiquity of this characterization of quality: 'I was much cheered to hear the ululations rising over Hampstead Heath and Camden [sic] Hill on Monday over the imminent Qualitätsdammerung, as smarties kept

chanting that this was the end of *Jewel in the Crown* and *Brideshead Revisited*, which seemed to be the only two examples they could think of'

Brideshead/Jewel have come to figure, within discussion of television's fictional output, as the acme of British quality. I want to offer some hypotheses on the 'quality components' in these particular programmes, and some thoughts on the likely consequences in the current debate.

1 *Literary source*

The power of the legitimating force of the Evelyn Waugh novel should not be underestimated. At the same time, the exclusion of the novel from the highest echelons of the literary hierarchy probably also works in favour of its literariness being lent to television. The adaptation of Evelyn Waugh (or Scott Fitzgerald, or Anthony Trollope, or Daphne du Maurier) does not occasion quite the rumpus we get with Jane Austen. 'Middle-brow' literature (to use an old-fashioned, but rather useful term) is not itself spoilt by the vulgar medium of television, and indeed enhances the upstart with a little culture. In this context, Dickens, a popular serializer in his day, is an interesting case, and Paul Kerr, in his discussion of adaptations and classic serials in 1982, points out that there have been more than thirty Dickens adaptations on the BBC since 1950.³³ With the Scott novels, despite (or perhaps because of) the Booker prize, contemporaneity seems to function in a similar way.

2 *The Best of British Acting*

The presence of name theatrical actresses and actors adds the international dimension of British theatre to the programmes. Again, the point here is not whether British theatrical acting, as exemplified by Dame Peggy Ashcroft or Jeremy Irons, is better than other traditions of acting, but that there is a comfortably established international (hence, foreign sales) body of opinion to this effect.

3 *Money*

Like MGM musicals, both these series cost a lot, and, as importantly, looked as if they cost a lot. As the comparison reveals, though, high production values can be deployed across different taste regimes. Throwing money at a project doesn't guarantee that it will look expensive, and it is the combination of restraint and uncommon spectacle which is the key signifier here.³⁴ These were expensive productions in which the money was spent according to upper-middle class taste codes whether to represent upper-class lifestyles or exotic poverty. 'Quality' has an archaic provenance, as Rupert Murdoch has been quick to point out: 'Much of what passes for quality on British television is no more than a reflection of the values of the narrow elite which controls it and has always thought

³³ Paul Kerr, 'Classic Serials – To Be Continued', *Screen*, vol. 23 no. 1 (May–June 1982) pp. 6–17. See also Carl Gardner and John Wyver, 'The Single Play from Rethian Reverence to Cost-Accounting and Censorship', *Screen*, vol. 24, nos. 4–5 (July–October 1983), pp. 114–129. Gardner and Wyver make the point, which seems relevant now, that what they see as the rapid collapse of the principles of public broadcasting leaves left critics in the curious position of having to defend and fight to retain a television system which they have spent years attacking for its elitism, paternalism, class-specificity and inaccessibility' (p. 127).

³⁴ J. Ellis discusses restraint as a key element in ideas of quality in the 1940s (Ellis, 1978, op. cit.). It recurs quite noticeably in the Broadcasting Research Unit pamphlet on *Quality in Television* (op. cit.) in a way that is relevant to my point here. High production values are not necessarily the same thing as precise and elaborate sets and costumes, clever lighting and expensive original scores. In the pursuit of excellence, inexpensive simplicity may be the best bet. This also requires craftsmanship or high production values (p. 17).

³⁵ Rupert Murdoch 14th James McTaggart Memorial Lecture 1989 Edinburgh Television Festival quoted in *Broadcast* 1 Sept 1989 p 8

³⁶ See essays by Richard Paterson and David Lusted in Richard Paterson (ed.), *Boys from the Blackstuff* BFI Dossier no 20 (London BFI, 1984) The way in which the popular resonance of particular programmes and catch phrases which arguably point to sites of 'everyday aesthetics' is ignored in discussions of quality once again indicates the importance of the written over the oral in the construction of legitimate judgements

³⁷ Richard Collins (1989) *op cit* Paul Kerr 'Quality Control' *New Statesman and Society*, 21 July 1989 pp 36-37

³⁸ Alan O Connor (ed.) *Raymond Williams on Television* (London and New York Routledge 1989) p 135

³⁹ *ibid.*, p 58

that its tastes are synonymous with quality'.³⁵ 'Quality' is semantically opposed to the common or the vulgar – these are expensive tales about 'the quality'. It is significant that it is *Brideshead/Jewel*, rather than *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982) (which had the quickest repeat in television history, and national popular acclaim³⁶) which have come to signify quality television. In another old fashioned usage, the way that money is spent in *Brideshead/Jewel* is fundamentally 'nice', even, or especially, when dealing with horrid subjects like rape, racism, alcoholism, homosexuality and suicide by fire.

4 *Heritage export*

As many commentators have pointed out, these series produced a certain image of England and Englishness (with little reference to the rest of Britain), in which national identity is expressed through class and imperial identity.

The widespread acceptance of *Brideshead/Jewel* as signifying quality thus condenses several sets of power relations. Crucially, they have come to function as *uncontroversial* indicators of quality. There is here no trouble with subjective factors, as there would be, for example, if *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1987), which has been one of the preferred tokens of those with more avant-garde tastes, was used. In the current linguistic usage of these programme names television is seen to have established a canon, which is perceived to be independent of personal taste. We see this most clearly in the cases of writers like Richard Collins, or Paul Kerr, who are reluctant to be complicit with the ideological baggage entailed, but have to recognize the semantic currency these programme names now have.³⁷ *Brideshead/Jewel* are uncontroversial signifiers of quality mainly because they incorporate already established taste codes of literature, theatre, interior decoration, interpersonal relationships and nature. Formally unchallenging, while nevertheless replete with visual strategies that signify 'art' their only specifically televisual demand is that the viewer switch on at the right time and watch. Just like the National Trust and advertisements for wholemeal bread, they produce a certain image of England and Englishness which is untroubled by contemporary division and guaranteed aesthetic legitimacy. In 1971 Raymond Williams calculated that 'the median date of current show pieces of English television' was 1925.³⁸ He begins to provide an answer to the question of why this should be the case in an earlier essay on a programme called *An Englishman's Home*, when he observes 'the past is all art and buildings, the present all people and confusion'.³⁹

Academics watch TV

Reading, in 1989, O'Connor's collection of Raymond Williams's television criticism from *The Listener* which was written between 1968 and 1972,⁴⁰ I have been struck by his enthusiasm for BBC2. It is the channel he chooses when trying to give an analysis of what has become known as 'flow', and also the one which scores highest in his 'serious television' stakes. As a critic, Williams is always attentive to class sleight of hand, quietly restoring the social context to a 1970 episode of *Survival* which dwells on the disappearance of the marshland bird, the bittern, with the 'of course' in this sentence 'Before clearance and draining the bittern may have been more widespread, of course' (p. 121). Or calculating that six or seven hours a week on the pools would be necessary to balance the unembarrassed coverage of stocks and shares in *The Money Programme* (p. 142). Williams likes BBC2 best most of the time because he finds it interesting and challenging. His political and class allegiances are clearly articulated throughout these essays as the basis from which he thinks about other things. Often, the thinking about other things from a socialist perspective brings him back to reflecting on the determining nature of class division. There is here no fear that to exercise judgement, to make discriminations, is elitist. Engaging critically with presentations, issues and stories is seen as emancipatory.

In a 1971 piece Williams attacks the definition of serious television advanced the previous week by Paul Fox, then Director of BBC programmes. Williams applauds the inclusion of fictional programmes within Fox's definition, but deplores what he sees as a utilitarian bias in which serious broadcasting has to be instructional in some way. However Williams is serious about the adjective 'serious', and retains a notion of hundred per cent attention in his own category, commenting approvingly that a *World About Us* 'could hardly be casually watched'. Williams' own definition of 'serious television' – 'programmes that looked as if someone had successfully meant something in making them, rather than simply slotted them into a market' (p. 129) – is insistently cross-generic, including *Match of the Day*, *Monty Python*, *Z Cars*, *The Money Programme*, and, rather grudgingly, *Panorama* and an *Omnibus* on T.S. Eliot. He cavils at the *Omnibus* because of its intellectual naiveté, and consistently searches for, and applauds, programmes that utilize the resources of television to their full extent. 'Serious' is, throughout these essays a term of approbation, but is frequently withheld from his contemporary equivalents of *Brideshead*/*Jewel*, programmes like *Civilisation*, or an adaptation of *Jude the Obscure*. This is partly because Williams is constantly searching for criteria which are specific to television in making his judgements. 'These are

programmes within the present real limits of television, and above all, they were not confused by the residual power of other art forms.’ (p. 135)

The aesthetic Williams develops, then, is formed within the two major cultural traditions of the West. It is a profoundly realist aesthetic, in that he believes strongly in the capacity of television to tell us about the world we live in, to extend our knowledge of cultures not our own, and enable us better to understand our own. Sometimes he can be very sharp about the way in which the medium which he conceives as potentially democratic and socially extensive is used: ‘All I have to say, there, is that nobody would believe there are 56 million people in Britain we see and hear so few of them’ (p. 42). However, it is also a modernist aesthetic in that it demands that form follow function and that television develop its own specificity. Williams has least time for productions which merely reproduce existing cultural habits and values.

Williams’s class confidence, and his belief in the value of education and argument leads him to the new minority channel, BBC2, without embarrassment. I think I was struck by discovering how much he liked this channel because I have, in the 80s, become accustomed to a type of academic populism in relation to television. It is not that I want to go all the way with ‘serious television’ if it means I can never watch television casually, but I like the construction of a cross generic category which takes leisure and pleasure seriously, which makes demands on the programme makers – however I choose to watch. Williams writes in another essay of ‘the small programmes which make up so large a part of decent television’ (p. 173), and ‘decent’ seems, in 1989, a word difficult to find, let alone defend. In the current context, Williams’ own work on the construction of ideas of the countryside, and the class history of pastoral, makes it perhaps appropriate to use Bourdieu’s comment on the role of populism for artists and intellectuals:

The essential merit of the ‘common people’ is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the ‘petit bourgeois’. Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of artists and intellectuals, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes lead them back to ‘popular’ tastes and opinions, the ‘people’ so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy.⁴¹

⁴¹ Bourdieu, *op cit* p. 62

Although there is frequently a strongly democratic and egalitarian motivation for the installation of ‘the people’ as the subject of a positively endorsed ‘mass culture’ aesthetic, I think that there are problems, of the type Bourdieu suggests, when this is the *only* aesthetic endorsed, and particularly when it is espoused in this fashion, within academia, by those most educated in other (implicit

or explicit) aesthetics. Meaghan Morris, in a recent essay on 'Banality in Cultural Studies', argued that 'the people' seem increasingly to function as the 'textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the critic's own activity'.⁴² This can be related to Jostein Gripsrud's discussion of the position of academics studying popular culture, and his argument that there is a danger of mystifying – forgetting the privilege of – the academics' own position.⁴³ Gripsrud is partly in dialogue with Michael Schudson's 1987 essay, 'The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia',⁴⁴ in which he calls for a recognition of the significance of formal and informal education in affecting responses to texts, and posits that

The challenge is not to deny a place for judgement and valuation but to identify the institutional, national, class, race and gender-bound biases set deep in past judgements, and to make them available for critical reassessment (p. 66)

It may be the case that the political climate of the early 70s made Williams' aligned practice of discrimination easier than the equivalent practice would be today. More important though, I think, is his confidence in the empowering and enfranchising potential of talking about ideas. It is not a sense of ease, or complacency, that these essays give, but of the value attributed to the often difficult task of thinking seriously about an everyday, ephemeral medium

I have argued here and elsewhere that television does not 'fit' into established aesthetic discourses. This lack of fit, the generic diversity of the medium, and the particular paradigms which have formed and dominated Television Studies make it peculiarly difficult to oppose coherently and democratically the highest-bidder award of commercial television franchises through the defence of 'quality'. This is particularly the case when the most currently accessible idea of quality, which I have designated *Brideshead/Jewel*, so clearly represents the historical and cultural privilege with which aesthetic judgement is encrusted. However, I hope I have also shown that it is not a category that can be dispensed with. Judgements about the quality of television are made in a great many ways all the time – in speech, in newspapers, in practice – and on television itself

The value audience members ascribe to, or gain from, particular programmes does not necessarily correlate with traditional ideas of quality. It does not follow from this that it does not matter what television is available, rather that the issue is considerably more complex than the government is currently suggesting. It is not possible to enter into discussions about quality unless difference is significant. Aware that in so many instances significant difference is made from and through social inequality, we stand in

⁴² Meaghan Morris 'Banality in Cultural Studies', *Block*, 14 (1988) pp 15–26. The article appeared originally in *Discourse*, vol 10 no 2 (1988). See also Judith Williamson, 'The problems of being popular', *New Socialist*, 41 (Sept 1986), pp 14–15

⁴³ Jostein Gripsrud 'High Culture revisited', *Cultural Studies*, vol 3 no 2 (May 1989) pp 194–207

⁴⁴ Michael Schudson, 'The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 4 (1987) pp 51–68

overcompensatory danger of refusing to recognize it. In this context, I have tried to argue, television scholars must engage with television in a way which recognizes the contradictions and paradoxes of the study of popular forms in the academy. This process is necessarily an historical one – there is a history, as well as a sociology and politics, of taste and value. It is also a self critical one which requires the re-opening of debates, particularly those around cultural values, which were closed off in *Screen* some years ago. Judgements are being made – let's talk about them

Alternative television in the United States

WILLIAM BODDY

As economic and political changes redefine the institutions of contemporary broadcasting in the United States and elsewhere, a sharpening debate has emerged around notions of alternative structures and modes of production for television, a debate which might usefully reflect on the history of independent television work in the U.S. The defining terms commonly attached to video work produced outside of the American broadcast institutions – ‘independent video’ and ‘artist’s video’ – beg distinctions less often argued than asserted within their critical communities. The defining absent term, the overbearing institution of commercial television, has remained a fugitive and implicit figure in much of the writing on American video since the 1960s. Despite a sometimes wilful hermeticism in the discourse around such alternative work, a brief account of its telescoped history in the United States can illuminate relations between independent video and the dominant television industry, as well as the changing profile of American commercial television as the moving target for oppositional practice.

The stylistically disparate works of independent video in its first two decades suggest the specific historical conditions of their making and reception. Nam June Paik’s ‘prepared’ TV sets, sculptures and performances of the 1960s and early 1970s incarnated a Neo-Dada aesthetic which asserted the personal gesture against the implacable flow of traditional commercial television. The ‘prepared’ TV sets and the video sculptures and installations of many video artists of the time re-contextualized the familiar domestic appliance as contingent, vulnerable and incongruous. Several early gallery works

used live, delayed and taped materials in monitor installations, challenging viewers' relation to the familiar TV screen through direct interaction with the video image. While animated by a revolt against the by-then hegemonic place of commercial broadcasting in defining the television apparatus, in retrospect much of the Neo-Dada video work also seems to replay wider contemporary anxieties accompanying the installation of the TV set as a domestic object in the American home.¹

¹ For a useful discussion of Nam June Paik's career see Martha Gever 'Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik' *Afterimage* no 10 (1982) pp 12–16, for an account of the anxieties which accompanied the positioning of American commercial television in domestic space see Lynn Spigel, 'Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space 1948–1955' *Camera Obscura*, no 16 (January 1988) pp 11–48

Despite the long, if limited, use of video in gallery installations, it was the introduction of half-inch portable video recording equipment in the U.S. in 1968 which largely defined subsequent independent video production. Video makers from within and outside the art world created a growing production community which remained almost entirely marginalized by the institutions of broadcast television. This gap, and the mutual antagonism between the two groups, was greater than that between the contemporary Hollywood cinema and independent filmmakers in the U.S. Broadcast television rejected independent work on aesthetic, political and even technological grounds (broadcasters decreed small-format video technically unfit for broadcast and warned that it could endanger their broadcast licenses by violating technical standards for transmission), and the exclusion united diverse independent producers in common marginality, creating a surprisingly close-knit community which took up the tasks not only of production, but also of distribution, exhibition, critical exegesis and publicity of the new work. An early video art show at a 57th Street gallery in New York City in 1969, for example, seems to have led directly to the formation of Raindance Corporation (a small-format video research and production group), Global Village (a still-extant media centre in New York City), and at least two other production groups. Raindance in 1971 published *Guerrilla Television*, a production handbook *cum* philosophical manifesto, as well as four years of a periodical entitled *Radical Software*. Other video production groups included Ant Farm (founded in 1968), Videofreex (1969), People's Video Theatre (1969), TVTV (1972), the Media Access Center at the Portola Institute (publishers of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*), and similar groups across the country.² The activities and discourses of the proclaimed 'video guerrillas' were initially visionary and at times grandiose, promoting storefront theatres, travelling video troupes and schemes for electronic democracy via interactive cable, although some of the groups later became producers of video-verité documentaries for public television and of dramatic pilots for the commercial networks.

² Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston 1971) pp 10–20. Deirdre Boyle 'Guerrilla Television' in *Transmission* ed by Peter D. Agostino (New York: Tanam Press 1985) pp 203–13

A pronounced strain of technological euphoria and utopianism animated the early guerrilla television movement, and its rhetoric was at times more ecological than political. The anti-political scientism of its manifestoes represents a clear break with the earlier

Soviet and European political and artistic avant gardes of the 1920s as well as with the contemporary practice of Godard and other European filmmakers. Raindance, in its *Guerrilla Television* handbook, discussed the name of their magazine, *Radical Software*

Most people think of something 'radical' as being political, but we are not. We do, however, believe in post-political solutions to cultural problems which are *radical* in their discontinuity with the past. Thus, our use of the adjective acts to lure people from an old context (the political) into our own.³

3 Shamberg, np

The post-political attitude produced an ironic echo of the agit-prop film-trains of the Russian civil war in *Guerrilla Television*'s description of the plans of the video collective Media Bus (formed when Videofreex abandoned New York City for a communal home in the country) to bring small-format video to the countryside:

They plan to extend their life style to Media Buses . . . , touring from town to town giving video shows and making tape. This is more or less analogous to rock road tours and will probably become self-sustaining when cable-TV opens up; a travelling troupe of video technicians and entertainers being paid to do local gigs at local TV studios or shoot tape in local communities.⁴

4 *ibid* p 52

From the political education of the agit-prop film-trains for Soviet artists like Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov to the vision of the video guerrilla as touring rock star of the 1970s, an enormous contextual shift has obviously occurred. At times the technological determinism of *Guerrilla Television* obliterates history and politics altogether in an inversion of social causality: 'Broadcast television is structurally unsound. The way it is used is the result of its inherent characteristics. Those attributes create the political and economic environment which determines the nature of programming, not visa-versa.'⁵ The technological determinism of the work also seems at times to find a technocratic fix on the political inequality of U.S. society: 'The original American political system is as elegant as any ever designed. The state-of-the-art of government is way behind that of information technology. We could be voting by cable-TV and legislators could use computer-retrieval systems to research government programs.'⁶

5 *ibid* p 32

6 *ibid* p 30

While the video guerrillas and other independent producers in the early years of video in the U.S. were never large in numbers, they had an important effect on the changing popular conception of American television. Network television, its commercial structures undisturbed and its profits soaring since the 1950s, seemed at the height of its power at the end of the 1960s. But by the late 1960s network hegemony began to be challenged not only by the manifestoes of the video guerrillas, but by political attacks from the Nixon administration over purported liberal bias in network news,

and by the economic prospect of the new delivery technologies of cable, low power television and direct broadcast satellites. The threat of the new television delivery services took a decade to challenge the networks' hold on American audiences, however, and while the networks were denounced as dinosaurs by the video guerrillas in the early 1970s, it wasn't until 1982 that the trade journal *Channels* used the same term in a legitimate if apocalyptic question, 'Are the Networks Dinosaurs', a question which has often been restated in the subsequent broadcast trade press.⁷

7 Les Brown, 'Are the Networks Dinosaurs?' *Channels*, June–July, 1982 pp 26–29 57

It was possible to predict too quickly the extinction of the commercial networks; while the networks' grasp on the prime-time audience did decline approximately fifteen percent in the 1970s, they still captured about three-quarters of American viewers. Moreover, most of the audience loss was not at the hands of exotic new technologies, but to independent stations largely offering reruns of previous network programming. Nevertheless, the new delivery technologies were widely hailed in the popular press of the 1970s as harbingers of a 'media revolution', bringing diversity and new viewer sovereignty to television in the home. In the popular press, cable television was the chief public benefactor, promising not only more channels of conventional programming, but specialized cable networks for diverse tastes

Above all, however, it was the idea of interactivity which fueled the extraordinary attention the new television technologies received in the 1970s. Echoing the language of the same video artists, cable entrepreneurs contrasted the traditional audience-subject of network television with one prophesized for interactive cable, where not only would viewers actively seek out and select from a myriad of programme choices, but would also accomplish information retrieval, shopping and voting from their homes. Richard DeCordova argues that cable's promised new subjectivity offered a transcendence and unity new to the television spectator, though similar to that effected in a different manner via the subject positioning of the classical fiction film.⁸ That the transcendent subject traded electronic omniscience for physical immobility and more perfect commodification was suggested in a 1981 trade handbook for interactive television:

8 Richard DeCordova 'Cable Technology and the Utopian Subject' *On Film* no 12 (Spring 1984), pp 23–27

In the coming age of interactive television the tremendous range of TV viewers' options in the home will contrast ironically to their shrinking options outside the home. . . . Unlike the expanded range of video services, the scope of our lives will narrow.⁹

9 John Wittek, *Response Television: Combat Television of the 1980s* (Chicago: Crain Press, 1981) p v

Notwithstanding the visions of utopian subjectivity promised by interactive cable, the economic forces behind interactive television included the appeal to Hollywood programme producers of a new pay-per-view box office and the appeal to advertisers of the more

10 Jean Baudrillard 'Requiem for the Media', in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Rochester Visual Studies Workshop Press 1986) p. 129

refined viewer demographic data possible with interactive cable's continuous surveillance of viewer activity. The triviality of the cable industry's wider notions of interactivity is suggested in the much-publicized Warner-Amex CUBE system of the late 1970s which occasionally offered instant viewer polls on issues inspired by its programming, enacting Jean Baudrillard's model of television's simulation of communication, 'a speech that answers itself via the simulated detour of a response'.¹⁰

The rhetorical similarities between the technological visions of some video guerrillas and the entrepreneurs of the booming cable industry of the 1970s seem disquieting in retrospect. The wishful thinking about the autonomy of technology and the refusal of history and politics among independent video makers may have inadvertently enlisted them as the avant garde for an (un)reconstructed communications industry only too happy to lead a 'media revolution' which would leave existing power relations untouched.

Of all the alternative distribution vehicles envisioned by American independent video makers in the 1960s and 1970s, the clear survivor is public access cable. That it has so survived within a vastly altered and hostile cable industry and in the face of successful political attacks on other public interest values of broadcasting is due in part to the peculiar circumstances of cable television in the U.S. Although cable had been around since the late 1940s, it was the success of satellite-delivered pay-cable networks like Home Box Office in the mid-1970s that attracted popular interest and major capital in the service. Because cable operators require access to public rights of way, local governments became cable's primary regulators in the form of local franchise agreements, which set rates and terms of service, frequently including the provision of public access: non-commercial channels reserved on a first-come, first served, non-discriminatory basis, with editorial control ceded to the programme producer. As the cable industry underwent a rapid consolidation from small owners to highly-capitalized multiple system operators in the late 1970s, the competition for large urban franchises became fierce. With channel capacity exceeding available programming services, cable operators looked at public access as an inexpensive bargaining chip with franchise officials, who themselves saw political advantage in other forms of access programming controlled by local governmental and educational institutions. The heady, speculative cable boom of the late 1970s touched off a 'franchise war' among firms bidding for big-city markets, in the words of one company president

The theory was to get the franchise, particularly in the large cities. Promise anything – large city fees, low subscriber rates, major

11 Burt I. Harris, president of Harris Cable Corporation, in 1975, quoted in Edward V. Dolan, *TV or CATV: A Struggle for Power* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications/Associated Faculty Press, Inc., 1984), p. 84

sophisticated systems, two-way communications capability – anything to get the franchise. Change it years later when the system was built and running. Use the franchise to raise new funds. It was standard procedure.¹¹

One result of the financial and political conditions of the growth of the American cable industry in the past fifteen years has been the opening up of a public space unique within all the dominant commercial media, print and electronic: subsidized free speech in the form of public access to a community's cable channels. The result of local franchise agreements has been television programming unconstrained by programme executives, cable management, or advertisers. Despite the opportunity such access obviously provides political activists, the Left in the United States has been slow to engage with public access, and public access programmers and producers remain largely isolated from progressive independent producers, media analysts and grassroots organizations. An examination of the experience of one production collective in progressive public access cable may illuminate some of the political and public-interest stakes in public access.



Paper Tiger Television
(Photo, Diane Neumaier.
Courtesy of the author.)

Paper Tiger Television is a video production collective which has created over 200 weekly thirty-minute programmes for public access cable in Manhattan since 1981. While each programme typically examines a single media text or issue, the entire body of Paper Tiger's work represents a broad analysis of the structures and products of the American mass culture industries. Though the shows, most of them produced live in a modest studio, are aimed primarily at the local cable television audience, tapes circulate to schools and to other public access programmers.

Paper Tiger Television's goal has been not only to analyse the American communications industry but also provide a model and network for other progressive public access programmers. The underfunded and politically precarious support of independent programming on public broadcasting has made public access television an important battleground in the 1980s. The continuing consolidation of the cable industry into a handful of giant multiple system operators, and their moves into ownership positions in cable programming firms, has created a growing hostility toward public access from vertically-integrated cable operators dizzy at the prospect of increasingly lucrative commercial cable programme services. The federal Cable Franchise Policy and Communications Act of 1984 stripped much of the powers of local authorities in cable regulation and allows cable operators to usurp 'underused' public access channels, and the Reagan and Bush administrations have given the communications industry unprecedented opportunities to roll back anti-trust and public interest standards in broadcasting.¹² The President of the National Association of Broadcasters announced to his members shortly after Reagan's inauguration:

The country has rediscovered that 'the business of America is business' – something lost sight of since Calvin Coolidge offered that definition some fifty years ago.

There is no question that the current climate favors us – we must take advantage of it by taking charge. . . I can say to you today that the opportunity is present to set the agenda for our own industry, create a strategic plan that will guarantee our growth, and gain control of our own destiny. Our timing is right – and there's no time like the present.¹³

Against this background of economic and political change within the American communications industry, Paper Tiger's manifesto outlines the following project.

The power of mass culture rests on the trust of the public. This legitimacy is a paper tiger. Investigation into the corporate structures of the media and a critical analysis of their content is one way to demystify the information industry. Developing a critical consciousness about the communications industry is a necessary first step towards democratic control of information resources.¹⁴

The programmes of Paper Tiger typically examine issues of ownership (including concentration within media industries, interlocking boards of directors, and the background of individual executives), composition and strategies of advertisers, and the demographics of readership or audiences. Many of the early shows examined the business press and other upscale publications, and at times the economic facts behind the publication seemed to be left to

¹² For a discussion of the impact of the Reagan administration on the television and film industries in the U.S., see Douglas Gomery *The Reagan Record* (Screen, vol. 30 nos. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1989) pp. 92-99).

¹³ Vincent T. Wasilewsky, speech at the National Association of Broadcasters convention April 12 1981.

¹⁴ Paper Tiger Television *Car a' log* (New York: Paper Tiger Television, 339 Lafayette Street New York NY 10012, 1987), back cover.

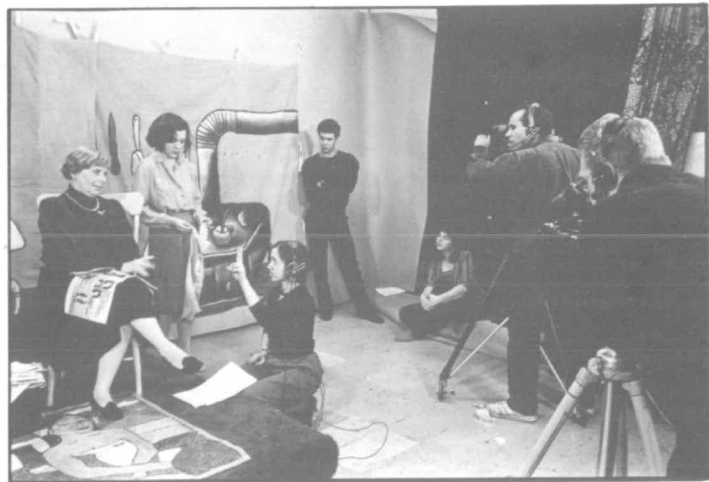
Paper Tiger Television
 (Photo, Diane Neumaier.
 Courtesy of the author.)



speak for themselves about the role of economic structures in determining meaning in media texts. The danger of such economism, however, needs to be understood against the prejudices of mainstream American media studies and the persistence of a number of popular myths about the media, including the heroic figure of the lone crusader-journalist and autonomous creative artist, independent of institutional and ideological contexts; the belief in journalistic objectivity and ideological 'balance', and a general hostility to economic analysis. Given this context, the simple insistence upon the relevance of economic, political and ideological determinations of media texts is a first step in challenging conventional assumptions about the media.

Paper Tiger has subsequently widened scope beyond the print press to address general themes across different media and take on more specifically populist media forms, like the weekly tabloid, *The National Enquirer*, romance novels and daytime television serials. In addition, the series has occasionally celebrated alternative periodicals like *Covert Action Newsletter*, as well as independent documentary filmmakers, early black cinema in the U.S., and popular theatre in Nicaragua.

The political profile of Paper Tiger Television is somewhat eclectic: the group's name recalls Mao's guerrilla stance against superpower hegemony, and the manifesto's assertion of the importance of the reproduction of ideology is compatible with the ideas of Gramsci. Althusser, economic marxism and anarchism. Paper Tiger's eclecticism is also due to its loose collective structure and work process: ideas for programmes are developed by the group months in advance, but generally each show is coordinated by one or two members who work with the programme's host on research and preparation of non-studio segments, props and dramatic vignettes. On the evening of a live show, members arrive at the



Paper Tiger Television
(Photos, Diane Neumaier.
Courtesy of the author.)

studio thirty or sixty minutes before transmission, sort out specific production tasks, prepare the set and props, cue tapes and try to set up some of the camera shots and transitions.

While the subject, tone and political line varies according to the specific host and programme, Paper Tiger Television does have a consistent visual style and attitude. These derive from pragmatic considerations and production constraints as well as from some of the lessons learnt from alternative video in the last twenty years. The eccentric visual style of the show is designed in part to mark the rejection of the standard fare not only of commercial television but also of most educational and public access programming. Rather than create pinched, low-budget imitations of a standard interview show or newscast, Paper Tiger employs a television style that is strikingly unconventional. Traditional television standards of casting, decorum, language, and political discourse are violated. The first six

Paper Tiger programmes featured media scholar Herbert Schiller 'reading' the *New York Times*, and something of the illustrated lecture style remains in the live shows. The critic speaks directly to camera, but the conventional props of the television lecturer are absent from the show. The backgrounds are non-illusionistic, cartoon-like painted flats. In many cases loosely-related dramatic action is staged next to the presenter: a female analysand lies on an analyst's couch; an Asian-American woman makes herself up in white-face; two players battle over control of the world in a parlour game; a viewer watches TV and falls asleep. The clash of presentational styles extends from the studio sequences to include superimposed character-generated text, staged and edited sequences inserted as breaks into the shows, on-the-street interviews and other documentary material, and frequent appropriation, via the soundtrack and visual inserts, of mass media images and texts.

The anti-realism of the dramatic sequences and the manipulation and juxtaposition of disparate texts and voices at its best creates a didactic television both Brechtian and carnivalesque. Some of the determinants of Paper Tiger's style are practical: relying on donated labour and small budgets precludes substantial rehearsal and post-production time and foregrounds the theatricality of live production. The legal status of public access allows unconstrained use of copyrighted material on Paper Tiger, from defaced corporate reports and re-edited daytime serials and, in *Joan Does Dynasty*, a performer electronically keyed into the space of the prime-time series' scenes. While hand-lettered titles generally open and close the show, several programmes have used electronic special effects, especially keys. The occasionally elaborate use of keys on several Paper Tiger shows nevertheless remains consistent with the programme's style: the keys and switching are done live, generally in ways which both draw attention to themselves as devices and demystify their construction. The overall effect of Paper Tiger's style is engaging and casual; most live shows include wide shots of the studio crew, and little attempt is made to provide the seamlessness of traditional television. Programmes typically end with an outline of the show's costs, generally under \$300.00. Some of the attributes of the programme's irreverent style echo a reflexive, anti-commercial genre of earlier independent video work, from Nam June Paik's 1960s Neo-Dada gestures to Shirley Clarke's real-time video improvisations, Dara Birnbaum's off-air collage tapes and Richard Serra's deadpan *Television Delivers People* of the 1970s.

A logical outgrowth of the work of Paper Tiger was an ongoing project begun in 1986, Deep Dish TV, which put together public access programming from across the United States into ten sixty-minute shows around the topics of labour, housing, women's issues, the farm crisis, racism, U.S. policy in Central America, disarmament, children's tapes and popular culture. The series



Paper Tiger Television
(Photos, Diane Neumaier.
Courtesy of the author.)

enlisted over 150 tapes by producers from thirty states, and was designed to mitigate the isolation of local public access programmers by linking them both with grassroots political groups organized around the programmes' issues, and with other independent video makers. A second goal was to offer to access programmers stylistic alternatives to the standard talk-show public access format, and to demonstrate to independent video producers the viability of satellite-delivered public access television as an outlet for their work. While part of the series' success was the demonstration that small-format video, including third-generation half-inch tapes, could be successfully distributed by satellite, the design of Deep Dish TV was quite different from the single-event satellite link-ups of video artists like Nam June Paik's 1984 *Good Morning Mr Orwell*. As opposed to Paik's unique satellite performance, Deep Dish TV enlisted the traditional television concept of regularly-scheduled series programming for new works and voices in order to encourage ongoing work.

The strand of optimism about the progressive possibilities of the tools of mass media from Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin to Hans Magnus Enzensberger has informed many U.S. independent video makers since the 1960s. While Brecht's brief 1932 essay, 'Radio as an Apparatus of Communication', and Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' were often cited aphoristically by many video artists, the lesson taken was most often the impropriety of the imbalance in the electronic media of few transmitters and many receivers. While many early video artists and video guerrillas called for an inversion of the model, their assertions often seemed based more on a leap of technological faith than on extending what the earlier media theorists diagnosed as the tension between the social formation and communications technology. Paper Tiger Television is committed to a form of television which is both decentralized and personal, but it is also precisely concerned with the historical and political determinations of the dominant media in U.S. society. Through a commitment to collective and grassroots production of small format video and to public access television, which has remained consistent from the video guerrillas of the 1960s through Paper Tiger Television in the 1980s, the collective lessons and pitfalls of twenty years of independent video in the United States can still illuminate and inspire.

(This is a revised version of an article which originally appeared in Communications, no. 48. It appears by kind permission of Raymond Bellour and the editors.)

That was the Workshops that was

ALAN LOVELL

THE second time our regular contact meeting with our Channel Four Commissioning Editor was postponed, we began to get worried. There were rumours that Channel Four was reconsidering its Workshop policy; that some, if not all Workshops would be cut. As our three year contract was coming to an end we were in a vulnerable position.

When the meeting was postponed for the fourth time, we feared the worst. We decided to confront our fears directly. We wrote to the Channel saying if our contract wasn't going to be renewed we'd like to know as soon as possible. At least we got a prompt reply. It was bad news. Our contract was unlikely to be renewed.

A few weeks later the bad news was confirmed. The Commissioning Editor came to see us to explain the decision. He wasn't very articulate about it. The Channel had no serious complaints about our work. It was rethinking its position about Workshops. 'What seems illogical to you at your end, makes sense to us at our end,' he said in conclusion.

I record the way the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop's contract with Channel Four Television ended for two reasons. First, out of a simple anger at the way we were treated. Second, and more important, because the delayed and incoherent explanation has a more general significance. It almost certainly indicates that a brave cultural experiment is coming to an end without the lessons being properly analysed.

The Workshop Declaration was an enterprising attempt to deal with some of the problems of funding film and video work by cultural bodies. Its operation has revealed obvious flaws. But they should be set against its principal strength – the encouragement of a consistent, long term policy of funding in place of the opportunistic, short term approach which has been (still is) the norm. As a Union, ACTT (the Association of Cinematograph, Television and allied Technicians) is not without its faults. But it deserves great credit for the part it played in formulating the Declaration and persuading potential partners to accept it. The Union's imagination and energy is being poorly rewarded by the way the Declaration is now being handled by Channel Four.

Worries, worries

It's possible to discern four areas of concern behind Channel Four's dissatisfactions with Workshops. Two have to do with specific points in the Declaration, two are of a more general kind.

The two points which worry the Channel in relation to the Declaration are, firstly, its unhappiness with the buyback arrangement (buyback is the fee paid to Workshops when a programme is broadcast), and, secondly, its desire to acquire more rights in a programme than the Declaration at present allows.

Workshops have tended to fetishize the Declaration. At times they have been unwilling to alter any dot or comma. But this is no longer the case. Both of these points

are seen to be negotiable. In any case these points never had the substance to threaten the whole agreement. They appear to have been mobilized by Channel Four to bolster its overall case against Workshops rather than for their intrinsic importance.

Money and politics

The two general concerns are more substantial and deserve serious discussion. The first is a concern about the funding situation. Channel Four argues that it always anticipated that Workshops would be funded from a variety of sources. Generally this has not proved to be the case. The Channel is not in a position to be the sole funder of Workshops.

There are two responses to this concern. The simplest is that it isn't true. Given the funds presently available, the Channel can fund a limited number of Workshops – enough to make Workshops a significant presence. What it cannot do is to fund an expansive sector of the kind too often glibly talked about in Workshop propaganda. The inability to do this does create problems for the Channel but there are solutions (indicated below) to these problems.

The second response is that the Channel should never have got itself into this situation (Nor should the Workshops.) Apart from the British Film Institute, the only likely source of funds was local authorities. The first ideas for a Workshop sector began to surface in the late 1970s. It's just about possible to forgive the people involved at that time for ignoring the problems which were beginning to gather for local authorities. The calling in of the IMF by the Labour Government and its faltering moves towards monetarist policies were possibly too new to be properly absorbed. But it's impossible to forgive people in the early 1980s who ignored the election of the Thatcher Government with its passionate

commitment to cutting public expenditure and rolling back the frontiers of the state. To imagine that, in this context, politically sympathetic local authorities could be consistent, long term funders of a film and video production sector was to be totally bemused by the example of the Greater London Council and to reveal a high degree of political naiveté.

In 1982 when Channel Four came on air it should have been very obvious that the Channel was likely to be the only substantial funder of Workshops. For representatives of Channel Four to be expressing disappointment in 1989 about the failure of Workshops to get other kinds of funding points to very poor political judgment.

If there was a funding source whose failure couldn't have been easily predicted, it was the British Film Institute. The BFI wasn't immune from Thatcherite pressures but within the resources it had available it could have provided more support for workshops than it did. It had publicly enthused about the Workshop movement, and even gave the Declaration an award. Yet the amount of money it spent annually on supporting five Workshops was much less than the budget of many of its Production Board films.

Even this money was only made available after heavy pressure from ACTT. Given Channel Four's relationship with the BFI it was in an even better position than the Union to 'encourage' the BFI to make more money available. That it failed to do so is another good reason for being unmoved by its laments about the absence of other funders.

Politics and aesthetics

The second general concern was that Workshops hadn't produced much by way of innovative productions. Unlike concern with the absence of other funders, I think this is a legitimate concern which deserves substantial

discussion. Its consideration involves issues of broader interest than just Workshop productions. The establishment of Workshops owed much to the cultural politics which emerged out of 1968. In the 1970s these politics appeared to provide the basis for a coherent movement (spearheaded by the Independent Film-makers Association and *Screen*). In fact the movement was always a coalition. Disagreements were held in check by the enthusiasm and energy of the time.

Two long term tendencies were key parts of the coalition – a 'political' tendency founded on a political dissatisfaction with the inadequate or inaccurate representation of the working class/oppressed groups on film and television, a 'cultural' tendency founded on a dissatisfaction with, and desire to improve, the cultural/artistic levels of the film and television industries.

These currents obviously intermingled in the 1970s, but, very broadly, people most strongly motivated by dissatisfaction with media representations of the working class/oppressed groups were attracted by the idea of Workshops; those wanting to improve the cultural/artistic levels of film and television preferred to work on an individual basis or within ad hoc groupings.

From the 1930s on, the 'political' tendency had never shown much interest in aesthetics. It had generally been content to accept a simple form of realism. An uncritical acceptance of community art ideas of the 1960s, with their insistence that authentic representations could only be achieved by oppressed groups themselves, further strengthened these characteristics. The consequences were not happy ones for Workshop productions. A 'degree zero' documentary form came to inhabit the schedules of *Eleventh Hour* and *People to People*: the subject – oppression of one kind or another; the structure – talking heads interspersed with vaguely illustrative material; presentation – low key and

undramatic; politics – a softish version of hard left positions.

Various attempts were made to develop out of this form. Most of them looked towards drama: dramatic episodes were mixed into documentaries, drama documentaries and feature films were produced. None of the attempts were especially successful.

The feature films were particularly mediocre. Producing a fifty-minute documentary is demanding in terms of the skills needed. A ninety-minute feature film demands an even greater range of skills – skills which cannot be acquired overnight. It is significant that the most successful feature film to come out of Workshops, Frontroom's *Acceptable Levels* (1983), was made by people with a considerable amount of film making experience.

The cultural tendency was obviously interested in aesthetics. One of the great attractions of the cultural politics of the 1970s was the way it renewed and stimulated interest in aesthetic questions. But for all the energy and enthusiasm that went into discussion, satisfactory positions were never produced.

Overall the contradiction between an attachment to an aesthetic of concepts and an aesthetic of deconstruction was never resolved. Even if a film is an appropriate vehicle for exploring theoretical concepts (I doubt very much that it is), how can it at one and the same time explore theoretical concepts and undermine the codes which are being used to conduct that exploration? Programmes which attempted this like the *Pictures of Women – Sexuality* (C4, 1984) series, or more recently *Out on Tuesday* (C4, 1989), only succeeded in making their formal strategies (arbitrary tracking shots, unexpected angles, disrupted images) into an often irritating and intrusive form of decoration.

Generally Workshops were not substantially affected by these aesthetics

Black Workshops like Sankofa and Black Audio were a surprising exception. Their attachment to the cultural politics of the 1970s gave their films an aesthetic dimension missing from most Workshop productions (though part of that quality resulted from an interest in Black culture – it was not surprising that names like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes should emerge as reference points). Given the aesthetic curiosity and cultural breadth of Sankofa and Black Audio's work, criticism seems churlish. But for all their interest, I don't think films like *Territories* (Sankofa, 1984), *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986), *The Passion of Remembrance* (Sankofa, 1986) and *Testament* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1988) escaped from the dead ends of 1970s aesthetics. The ideas in the films often lack substance. The politics aren't convincing. And they offer a sense of 'ART' which is irritating and oppressive in the way Godard's later films so often are.

Workshops can certainly be charged with a failure to develop challenging aesthetic strategies. But so could many other radical independent film producers. To take an obvious example, *The Media Show* (C4), which is produced by a number of people with that kind of background, has settled into a blandly conventional form

Part of the problem has been that the Commissioning Editors for Independent Film and Video are themselves products of the cultural politics of the 1970s. They are trapped within its contradictions and limits as much as any of the film and video makers they support. Their sense of innovation is defined by the aesthetics of that time. They have the same belief in the value of a close relationship with a community for producing authentic representations. Indeed there could be no better example of a naive belief in authentic representation than a series called *People to People*

It is unfair that Workshops should have their futures threatened by being made to

carry the burden of these failures. What's needed is a proper accounting of the cultural politics of the 1970s. Leading theorists of that period (Paul Hirst, Ernesto Laclau) whose work was used to justify vanguard politics and avant-garde art are now re-emerging as champions of social democracy. There could hardly be a more appropriate sign that such an accounting is urgently necessary

Problems and solutions

The analysis Channel Four has made of the Workshops is, I believe, superficial and ill-considered. That is not to say that Workshops are not open to criticism. I have already suggested that Workshop aesthetics need reconsideration, and there are a number of other substantial problems

After our contract with Channel Four came to an end, members of the Workshop made an analysis of the situation and tried to offer solutions to the problems we identified. What follows is a modified version of a paper we submitted to the Franchised Workshops Committee of ACTT. The solutions are not meant to be hard and fast ones. In particular all figures in the paper are provisional

1 There's never been any agreement about how many Workshops there should be overall. In principle any group can go to Channel Four and ask for Workshop support. In practice the number is limited by the amount of money the Commissioning Editor has available

The lack of agreement about an overall number combined with a rhetoric coming from Workshop sources of an expansive sector has meant there's continuous pressure on the Editor from groups who want to get in on the action. Such pressure is psychologically wearing. It's not surprising that somebody would want to free themselves from it.

The pressure would be easier to resist if

there was a formal agreement about the overall number, determined by a public rationale. Our suggestion is that Workshops should be established on a regional basis analogous to the ITV system. There should be a Workshop in all the nations/major regions of the United Kingdom. An adaptation of the ITV map could be used for this purpose.

At present Channel 4 supports about a dozen Workshops. We suggest that the maximum should be fifteen. Of these twelve would be established on a regional basis. Three would be 'wild cards' to be used at the discretion of the Commissioning Editor to make up for obvious gaps.

It might be that Workshops established on a regional basis didn't adequately represent women or ethnic minorities. The Editor could compensate for this by establishing a Women's Workshop or a Black Workshop, outside of the regional framework.

- 2 Workshops were originally set up in a random way. Their existence depended on the lobbying powers of particular groups, the Commissioning Editor's contacts, etc. Not surprisingly this has generated a good deal of resentment from people unable to get into the system.

It's impossible to defend the random method. A publicly visible process by which groups get Channel Four support needs to be established. Again we'd take the ITV system as a model. The availability of regional workshop franchises should be openly advertised and applications invited. The Commissioning Editors should decide and make public the reasons for the decision.

- 3 If Workshop franchises are publicly advertised, clear criteria need to be established so that groups know what they are competing for. Existing criteria need to be clarified. As we understand them they

are a mixture of (a) different voices, (b) regionalism; (c) innovation. We suggest that (a) and (b) are maintained and that (c) is dropped.

Innovation has always been vaguely conceived. Basically it relates to avant-garde ideas of the 1970s which have proved to be failures when adapted for television. We think it's important to get rid of this criterion because it floats around in the Commissioning Editors' minds, confusing the situation.

4. The position of the Workshop sector in the overall film and television industries needs clarifying. Our experience suggests that it should be seen as intermediate between training and full-blown independent production. The Workshop sector should provide its employees with a range of production experiences which would equip them to operate as independents.

From Channel Four's point of view the Workshops should be regarded as, in part, a fulfillment of their concern for minorities and, in part, an investment in present and future production sources.

If the Workshop sector is situated in this way, appropriate budgets need to be established. Workshops might expect to operate within a range of the £50,000 per hour documentary and the £100,000 per half hour fiction.

- 5 The length of Workshop contracts with Channel Four has never been finally settled. Nor whether there is a final cut-off point. We suggest the following:

Contracts should, in the first instance, be for three years. At the end of that period the Commissioning Editor could decide (a) to renew the contract for a further period or (b) offer it for public competition with the existing Workshop being allowed to compete for it.

The second period should be for five years. At the end of this the franchise should be open to public competition but

the existing Workshop wouldn't be able to compete for a further contract. So eight years would be the final cut-off point.

Such a timetable would help to deal with another of the substantial problems the Commissioning Editor faces – how to get new blood into the system. Our proposal allows for new blood to come in at two points and doesn't commit the Channel to the perpetual funding of any group.

6 *It should be established clearly that the prime purpose of Workshops is production. There should be no obligation on Channel Four to fund other activities. So Workshops will be free to engage in education, exhibition, distribution (integrated practice) but they'll need to find the money from other sources to finance these activities*

7. *If it's accepted that Workshops are primarily production units, a stronger link needs to be made between their output and its showing on Channel Four. At present Workshop production is scheduled in an opportunistic way almost exclusively on the Eleventh Hour. To establish a stronger link we suggest Channel Four establishes a series devoted exclusively to workshop productions*

The content of the series would be settled by negotiations between the Commissioning Editor and the Workshops. Workshop productions would then be more visible and more open to criticism. This should concentrate minds on the job in hand!

THE END?

By the time this article is published these proposals will probably be academic. The process of dismantling the Workshop Movement will be too far gone to be stopped. The Commissioning Editor for Independent Film and Video argues that the changes being introduced are only

modifications; that the Channel will continue to support Workshops

The litmus test for judging the changes seems to me to be support for Workshops over a period of time. I would regard three years as the minimum acceptable period. Significantly the Editor is talking about one year as the minimum. (I suspect it's likely to be the maximum as well.)

Support over a period of years is a crucial issue because it indicates a particular attitude to artistic production. The dominant attitude amongst cultural funders is that there are numbers of talented individuals out there who simply need to be given the opportunity to express their talent. It's effectively the old romantic view of art.

The view is attractive because it allows funders, firstly, to act as patrons in a direct 'one-to-one' way – they're very obvious discoverers of 'talent'; and, secondly, it allows them to cast off failures quickly and move on to discovering the next 'talent'. The policy of short term, opportunistic funding which this encourages seems to me to have been wasteful and unproductive. It would be extremely interesting to do a cost benefit analysis of the money which the BFI Production Board has spent over the last thirty years.

The view of artistic production behind the Workshop Declaration is that it takes time and there has to be space for failure for worthwhile work to be done. 'Talent' is a learnt ability. Paradoxically, Workshops could be seen to be trying to create the kind of environment the Hollywood studios offered

If I wanted a good justification of why Workshops are necessary, Jonathan Kaplan's explanation of why he directed *Student Teachers* (1973) would do:

'When I looked at the filmographies of the directors I admired, I noticed that they made a hell of a lot of movies before they made a good one. And I made the decision, consciously, to make as many movies as I

could in as short a period of time as I could.’
(quoted in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*,
February 1989)

(In response to this article, Rod Stoneman, Deputy Commissioning Editor for Independent Film and Video at Channel Four, will offer, in a subsequent issue, his own reflection on the relationship between the Workshops and Channel Four, and an historical perspective on the development of the Independent Sector in Britain over the last decade.)

reports

The Warwick Conference on European Popular Cinema, September 1989

As Ginette Vincendeau and Richard Dyer, the organizers of this fascinating conference, reminded us in their presentation of the subject, the 'European' and the 'popular' are rarely considered in conjunction, at least in film studies circles. Hollywood is generally considered the source of the popular while Europe retains the art.

The papers at Warwick did little to disturb this conventional taxonomy. Indeed, one contributor (Jean-Pierre Jeancolas) went so far as to suggest that popular cinema in Europe might be defined by its 'inexportability'. What more convincing proof of this thesis than the unimaginably unattractive Finnish national hero Uuno Turhapuro, 'a caricatural Finn, untidy and lazy (. . .) His extraordinary verbal skills help him avoid regular work and allow him to concentrate on such basic needs as eating and sleeping'. Though the grotesque attributes of this local hero can be traced, *mutatis mutandis*, in the carnivalesque representations to be found in many countries, it is surely the specificities which count. Uuno is as incomprehensible, to the outsider, as *Carry on Camping* must undoubtedly be. And even if it is true, as one valiant attempt at synthesis proposed, that all popular cinema wages a struggle round the body, the zones of interest vary from region to region. In Finland it would appear to be the belly while in France, for example, it is the buttocks.

Whether or not the popular cinema is to be defined by its elements of subversion or, in the Bakhtin tradition, inversion, the paradox in Europe seems to be that it is confined as well as defined by its audience. In exposing the connivance or complicity, the

repetition and recognition on which many of its themes, especially its comic themes, rely, paper after paper hinted at the intimate relationship between popular cinema and national identity in Europe, with the result that this conference took on an interesting political role.

Anyone who sampled the range of sessions devoted to the film output of virtually every European country would have come away with little impression of thematic coherence but the realization that such cinema always demands a specific, autarkic economic base. Thus it is not so much the nature of the audience that matters (whatever the practices of the marketing industry) as the ability to identify its confines. These are usually co-terminous with national boundaries but sometimes, as in the case of the French *comiques troupiers*, with professional groupings. Since the advent of mass television in Europe (c. 1970) such identification has been less and less certain and by the 1980s it has become virtually impossible. The so-called 'art' or 'quality' film in Europe, the *auteur* cinema promoted through TV co-productions, is an attempt to reconstruct the identifiable audience that has disappeared at the national levels, but this time on the basis of shared educational or generational rather than national or occupational values. Inevitably, this presents difficulties in defining the popular, which is traditionally associated with the demotic. Thus by a peculiar ideological reversal, the European popular cinema, at least as it emerged at Warwick, comes to seem not merely a contradiction in terms, but an outdated form for geographical and economic reasons. One comes to the conclusion that the 'Europe of the people' predicated on the continuation and preservation of 'diversity', can only be achieved at the non-popular end of the cultural spectrum in these days of co-productions, privatized television, multiple channels and satellite broadcasting.

This, then, was an occasion for nostalgia

and reminiscences, for the habits of childhood momentarily recaptured by a generation of researchers which, if it grew up with television, did not yet turn it on at breakfast and which was still able – just – to put some distance between itself and the output of its own media. This is why this conference will prove seminal. In ten years time the alert viewer will surely have lost the capacity to be sufficiently objective to recognize and distinguish the popular from the rest: social, political and cultural change in Europe will have rendered the category virtually meaningless.

Jill Forbes

**Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, Italy,
14–21 October 1989**

DURING its eight years of existence, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, a week-long festival of silent films, has grown into a major international event. Typically it centres around one large retrospective of a national cinema or a studio, supplemented by a secondary examination of a single filmmaker. The programme also includes rediscovered films, Italian films, and unidentified prints. Music accompanies all screenings, supplied by marathon piano-players or chamber groups; a few screenings use orchestral accompaniment.

Since 1986, the main retrospectives have dealt with pre-1918 Scandinavian cinema, the Vitagraph studio, and American films of the teens. The festival's organizers achieved a considerable triumph in 1989 by presenting the largest retrospective of pre-1920 Russian films ever held. While Western governmental leaders debate whether 'glasnost' is real, film scholars have been benefiting from it for some time, in conferences in various countries. In this case, the Soviet national archive, Gosfilmofond, along with other

Soviet institutions, provided films and documents for the Pordenone festival and catalogue.

Of the 286 pre-1920 films preserved at Gosfilmofond, the festival's programmers chose about 70. (The invaluable catalogue, *Testimoni silenziosi: film russi 1908–1919* [bilingual in Italian and English, co-published by Edizioni Bibliotec dell'Immagine and the British Film Institute] contains a filmography of all 286 surviving films.) While these included several films by the pre-Revolutionary director best known in the West, Yakov Protazanov, the schedule placed heavier emphasis on the less familiar Evgenii Bauer. Bauer's films are undoubtedly of considerable interest. *After Death* (1915), *Daydreams* (1915) and *The Dying Swan* (1917) are virtually Buñuelian in their studies of obsessive morbidity, and Bauer's origins as a set designer make his mise-en-scène visually striking. Other possible auteurs were also in evidence. Kai Hansen's delightful fairy tale, *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Little Fish* (1911), and his stylish thriller, *The Secret of the House No. 5* (1912), suggest a notable talent, as does Petr Cardynin's sympathetic study of a ballerina trapped in a boring provincial marriage, *The Love of a Councillor of State* (1915). In general, the programme made it clear that during the teens the Russians developed a distinctive national cinema, characterized by a slow pace that allows the spectator to linger over the characters' psychological reactions. Yuri Tsivian's excellent catalogue essay suggests why this leisurely, intense style of melodrama was popular in Russia.

The choice of Augusto Genina for this year's supporting retrospective was not entirely a happy one. Genina's concentration on melodrama meant that his films were often similar in tone to the Russian films, and thus there was not as much variety as in previous years (when, for example, the 1986 salutes to Max Linder and Georges Méliès perfectly balanced the Scandinavian films).

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Since 1986, the main retrospectives have dealt with pre-1918 Scandinavian cinema, the Vitagraph studio, and American films of the teens. The festival's organizers achieved a considerable triumph in 1989 by presenting the largest retrospective of pre-1920 Russian films ever held. While Western governmental leaders debate whether 'glasnost' is real, film scholars have been benefiting from it for some time, in conferences in various countries. In this case, the Soviet national archive, Gosfilmofond, along with other

Soviet institutions, provided films and documents for the Pordenone festival and catalogue.

Of the 286 pre-1920 films preserved at Gosfilmofond, the festival's programmers chose about 70. (The invaluable catalogue, *Testimoni silenziosi: film russi 1908–1919* [bilingual in Italian and English, co-published by Edizioni Bibliotec dell'Immagine and the British Film Institute] contains a filmography of all 286 surviving films.) While these included several films by the pre-Revolutionary director best known in the West, Yakov Protazanov, the schedule placed heavier emphasis on the less familiar Evgenii Bauer. Bauer's films are undoubtedly of considerable interest. *After Death* (1915), *Daydreams* (1915) and *The Dying Swan* (1917) are virtually Buñuelian in their studies of obsessive morbidity, and Bauer's origins as a set designer make his mise-en-scène visually striking. Other possible auteurs were also in evidence. Kai Hansen's delightful fairy tale, *The Tale of the Fisherman and the Little Fish* (1911), and his stylish thriller, *The Secret of the House No. 5* (1912), suggest a notable talent, as does Petr Cardynin's sympathetic study of a ballerina trapped in a boring provincial marriage, *The Love of a Councillor of State* (1915). In general, the programme made it clear that during the teens the Russians developed a distinctive national cinema, characterized by a slow pace that allows the spectator to linger over the characters' psychological reactions. Yuri Tsivian's excellent catalogue essay suggests why this leisurely, intense style of melodrama was popular in Russia.

The choice of Augusto Genina for this year's supporting retrospective was not entirely a happy one. Genina's concentration on melodrama meant that his films were often similar in tone to the Russian films, and thus there was not as much variety as in previous years (when, for example, the 1986 salutes to Max Linder and Georges Méliès perfectly balanced the Scandinavian films).

Still, the Genina programme carries on Le Giornate's valuable ongoing revelation of the history of Italian silent cinema

One noteworthy festival policy is to programme films relating to previous years' retrospectives. Thus, for example, as a follow-up to the group of films by John H Collins shown during the American Teens programme of 1988, this year's festival presented an additional film, *The Children of Eve* (1915). Similarly, Raoul Walsh's little-known 1915 masterpiece, *Regeneration*, was shown as a supplement to the teens programme

This year's Giornate also included a section of films by Chaplin, saluting his centenary. A screening of *City Lights* with live orchestral accompaniment provided the traditional closing-night spectacular, and *A Woman of Paris* and various films influenced by it were also shown. Other festival highlights included a recently rediscovered 1899 Méliès film, *Le chevalier mystère*, and two rare and interesting early films by Alessandro Blasetti: the surviving fragment from *Sole* (1929) and his early sound film, *Resurrectio* (1930)

Having attended four Pordenone festivals, I remain perpetually astonished that an annual event can so consistently present ground-breaking retrospectives of silent films. Next year's examinations of pre-1919 German cinema promises to carry on this tradition in impressive style

Kristin Thompson

Film and the Humanities at the Australian National University

GENEROUS funding enables the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) of the Australian National University (ANU) to host a large pool of visiting scholars every year. Though primarily free to pursue their own research,

visitors are also expected to instruct and entertain the site-specific species of homo academicus at this well-stocked watering hole. The HRC nominated film as the 'theme' for study in 1989 – to be followed by biography and autobiography in 1990 – and organized two conferences, under the titles 'Coming to Terms with the Photographic Image' (4th–6th July, 1989) and 'Film and Representations of Culture' (25th–28th September, 1989)

Unfortunately, there is no department of Cinema Studies at the ANU, with the result that the conference organizers and participating local academics were unfamiliar with the body of work that has been produced over the past thirty years in film scholarship. The selection of scholars and conference papers was weighted heavily in favour of academic anthropology, a discipline strongly represented at the ANU, rather than film scholarship. Literary scholars doing their novel-into-film routines formed another subset. Film scholars were consequently placed in the position of teacher to the uninitiated (having to provide crash courses in film theory) or disdainful outsider (abandoning engagement and assuming that even conference visitors were ignorant of their published work)

In this context, the four-day Film Festival which preceded the first conference performed a valuable educational function. Under the title 'Documentary: A Fiction (Un)Like Any Other', Bill Nichols and Julianne Burton presented a series of mini-lectures and screenings on issues in contemporary documentary. They not only questioned the categories of authenticity, non-fiction, objectivity and ethnic purity so dear to (white male) anthropological filmmaking, they also screened some provocative films and videos which focused an anthropological eye on the filmmaker's own domestic personal territory. Notable among these were Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* (Canada, 1988, 28 mins.), Mitchell

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Block's *No Lies* (USA, 1977, 30 mins) and Marilu Mallet's *Unfinished Diary* (Canada, 1982, 40 mins.)

Although documentary specialists found the series of lectures ultimately muddle-headed (see Barrett Hodsdon's critique, 'Looking for the filmmaker in the doco' in *Filmnews*, September 1989), and noted the absence from the programme of salient Australian examples of creative documentary practice, the Festival evinced a structural systematicity, a conceptual logic, markedly lacking in the conferences which followed. These consisted of isolated individual papers rather than panels, which can more easily draw issues together across papers. Discussants and presenters were too often drawn from different academic disciplines, sharing little or no common knowledge or assumptions. Topics of papers covered a wide range of times, places and issues. On one day during the first conference, we jumped from looking at representations of war in film and photography, to first-person testimonial narratives in Latin American fiction and film, to a musical analysis of Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. The second conference, supposedly concerned with issues involved in filming and reading the films of other cultures – while including amid the dominant anthropological discourse a paper by Paul Willemen which advocated a dialogic approach to cross-cultural criticism, and one by Ann Kaplan which problematized the reading of gender issues in Chinese cinema –

incorporated yet another novel-into-film job along with Sylvia Lawson's lively (and fascinatingly illustrated) presentation of the issues involved in the construction of a film on the history of the construction of the Sydney Opera House. On one afternoon, we digressed altogether to focus on two popular Hollywood genres. Barbara Creed's paper on the representation of the body in the horror movie and Gaylyn Studlar's on the John Barrymore romantic melodramas of the 1920s were the densest and most scholarly of all the papers I heard at this conference, but they had little to do with the conference theme, and little attempt was made to produce a fruitful debate or discussion through cross-referencing between one and the other.

The mishmash of voices in both conferences might be explained in part by the problem of co-ordinating schedules of various visiting scholars; but this is not the whole story. The main reason was the deployment of academics from diverse disciplines, rather than film specialists, in the planning and organization of the programme, and the organizers' felt need to incorporate their own colleagues as paper-givers and discussants. It is disgraceful that cinema studies, while being taught at almost every other Australian university, does not feature on curricula at the Australian National University, the country's major recipient of funding for academic research.

Freda Freiberg

reviews

review article:

**Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse*.
London: Methuen, 1987, 310 pp.**

**John Fiske, *Television Culture*.
London: Methuen, 1987, viii + 353 pp.**

JAMES DONALD

Channels of Discourse and *Television Culture* have been around for a couple of years now, and are already established as key texts in their field. But although it may be rather late in the day for a conventional review, the two books do tell us something about the present state of media studies. To set the scene, I shall invoke some other signs of the times.

Scene 1. In an interview with *Screen Education* in 1979, Raymond Williams was asked about the political significance of media education. He suggested that teaching people about the forms and hidden agenda of television might build up 'the beginning of a necessary public opinion':

The longterm advantage of this education would not just be critical awareness. This was the *Scrutiny* position, that critical awareness in itself would make the significant difference. Well, it does to some extent, but it is critical awareness as a basis for really being able to understand and participate in the typical social argument and indeed social struggle that the new institutions would involve.¹

Perhaps it was the malaise brought on by eight years of Thatcherism, but by 1987 Williams was less optimistic. Asked by Terry Eagleton how the political power of the press and the other mass media might be contested, he replied

Well, one can talk of course of education – of arming people's

¹ 'Television and Teaching: An Interview with Raymond Williams' *Screen Education* no. 31 (Summer 1979), p. 10

minds against that kind of journalism. But there's now been a sustained cultural attempt to show how this manipulation works, which has hardly impinged on its actual power. I don't see how the educational response can be adequate. The manipulative methods are too powerful, too far below the belt for that. These people have to be driven out. We have to create a press owned by and responsible to its readers.²

² Raymond Williams (interview with Terry Eagleton), 'The Practice of Possibility', *New Statesman* 7 August 1987, p. 21.

You don't have to endorse Williams's irritable, insurrectionary alternative to understand his impatience. He was undeniably right that all our educational efforts at 'demystifying' or 'deconstructing' television and the press have had scant impact on the way they operate.

Scene 2. A friend arrives at one of our most prestigious universities to teach media studies. The existing syllabus for a term's course on television reveals a familiar map: soap operas, sitcoms, crime series, news, and several weeks of British television drama. One introductory session is set aside to cover questions about institutions, technology, political economy, and so on. Without ignoring the construction of meaning in different television genres, the course is rapidly revised to take more extensive account of other, less text-centred issues: the present transitions in the structure of broadcasting, both in this country and internationally; the debates about democracy and 'liberty of the press' that provide the intellectual and political context for these changes, competing conceptions of broadcasting in terms of 'markets' or 'public service', and of those who appropriate it as 'publics', 'audiences' or 'consumers'. Some weeks into the course, however, two students complain that this is all very interesting, but in the end isn't television all just a question of *ideology*? In other words, isn't media studies simply an initiation into that new elect of justified sinners, the culturally undoped?

Scene 3. In her *Screen* review of the 1988 International Television Studies Conference, Susan Boyd-Bowman shows surprising venom in repudiating Ian Connell and Geoff Hurd as 'two apostates from left-wing politics'. Their crime? The heresy of making a case for 'the reorientation of media education away from critical theory and towards employment prospects':

Replace semiotics with management training skills. It doesn't matter what girl number twenty knows about ideology (to paraphrase Judith Williamson's controversial article in *Screen Education* a few years ago); what does she know about editing high-band video?³

³ Susan Boyd-Bowman 'Biennial Report', *Screen*, vol. 30, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1989), p. 142.

But if 'critical theory' has bounced harmlessly off the media institutions, and seems sometimes to imply little more than an attitude of 'they can't fool me', doesn't Connell and Hurd's

⁴ See Ian Connell and Geoff Hurd
Cultural Education: A Revised
Program *Media Information*
Australia no 53 (August 1989),
pp 23–30. Marx of course took
their side of the argument: he
argued that working-class
education should be a
combination of paid productive
labour, mental education, bodily
exercise and polytechnic
training.

emphasis on a critical vocationalism make good sense both educationally and politically?⁴ In a polytechnic in an area of high unemployment like the West Midlands, which is where they work, might not girl number twenty appreciate the chance to learn some marketable skills, which would be analytical as well as technical, rather than instruction in some media studies catechism?

The moral of these anecdotes is that, if it ever had one, media studies – in Britain, certainly – has lost any unifying sense of intellectual direction or political purpose: a view confirmed by the hesitations and inconclusiveness of the British Film Institute's conference in February 1989 on redefining media studies in higher education for the 1990s. The question for *Channels of Discourse* and *Television Culture* is therefore whether these books offer new objectives appropriate to the state of our educational and audiovisual culture: what do they see as the point of all this effort? What do they present as their object of study? What bodies of knowledge, critical perspectives and methodologies do they cover and/or endorse? And, given that they are designed for the undergraduate market, what sort of teaching do they imply?

Channels of Discourse is the better book. Its aim is to introduce a number of critical approaches – semiotics, narratology, reader-response, genre, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism and 'British cultural studies' – and to assess their relevance to the study of television programmes. At this level, it works well. Most chapters are meticulous in setting out often complex ideas so that students should find them accessible and provocative. It thus provides a useful guide to the effectiveness with which these perspectives and methods can be applied to television as a limit case of 'textuality'. The limitation of the book is that it takes over these critical perspectives as they exist *a priori* in other intellectual fields, it does not attempt to derive its theories and methodologies from the nature of this 'television' that they are supposed to explain. Its object of study remains Theory; it generally stays within the text-reader paradigm of poststructuralist semiotics, and has disappointingly little to say about what sort of phenomenon or institution or practice 'television' is. (Sandy Flitterman-Lewis comes closest in her chapter on psychoanalysis. She discusses television as a medium and, fleetingly, as an apparatus – as, too, does Ann Kaplan – but both still do so primarily in terms of television as not-film, not-cinema.) The category 'television' remains elusive, always tantalizingly out of reach.

In his contribution on 'British cultural studies' in Allen's collection and in his own *Television Culture*, John Fiske does attempt to move beyond an exclusive focus on the production of meaning and the inscription of addressees in television programmes towards a consideration of the ambiguous pleasures of watching.

television as part of everyday life. Sadly, neither his perspective nor his conclusions are persuasive. Their shortcomings have been painstakingly itemized in earlier reviews. Alan O'Shea has shown how much less sophisticated Fiske's approach is than the best work developed in the post-Gramscian paradigm developed at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies; and in doing so he challenges (very politely) Fiske's presumption in claiming to speak in its name.⁵ Less restrained is Meaghan Morris, who sees Fiske's work as symptomatic of a cancerous 'banality' in cultural studies. This is evident in his celebration of audiences' subcultural 'resistance' to television's ideological power. Here 'the people' become 'the textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the critic's own activity', and the whole enterprise is rendered narcissistic and trivial, 'generating over and over again the same article which never goes beyond recycling and restating its basic premises'.⁶

All true, I'm afraid – and with what educational implications? Large chunks of *Television Culture* will no doubt be stitched into undergraduate essays; and along with them its ahistoricism, its failure to interrogate its own criteria for judgment, its argumentation by assertion rather than logic, its indiscriminate invocation of mutually incompatible authorities. Although Fiske states (without justifying the definitions) that his book is about television as 'a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures' and about culture as 'the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society' (p. 1), the actual object of study turns out to be two already existing, and rapidly expanding, bodies of knowledge: critical analyses of television as text and empirical studies of television audiences. Together, these add up to Fiske's zero-sum game of culture. The former reveal how the dominant ideology is inscribed in individual programmes, however fissured it may become in the process, the latter show how The People subvert it. No need to reform television, then. The People's 'resistive' viewing habits mean that 'cultural democracy' exists already. All the radical media theorist needs to do is to pat them on the head. Fiske's 'implied student' needs only to learn how to dress up tastes and opinions in a jargon of vaguely politicized academicism, rather than master any identifiable scholarly or intellectual skills.

The fundamental question that neither *Channels of Discourse* nor *Television Culture* addresses is a very simple one: what is television? As these silences suggest, the answer is not self-evident. Programmes-as-texts are only one part of the story; even programmes-plus-what-people-do-with-them is a necessary but still not a sufficient conceptualization.⁷ The books lack a sense of television as apparatus or cultural technology: that is, as an

5 Alan O'Shea 'Television as Culture: Not Just Texts and Readers' *Media Culture and Society*, vol. 11 (1989) pp. 373–379.

6 Meaghan Morris 'Banality in Cultural Studies' *Block* no. 14 (1989), pp. 20 and 22 (first published in *Discourse* vol. 10, no. 2 [1988] pp. 3–29).

7 It is in this area that some of the most innovative and thoughtful research is now being carried out. See, for example, Roger Silverstone 'Let us then Return to the Muzzling of Everyday Practices: A Note on Michel de Certeau's *Television and Everyday Life*' *Theory Culture and Society* vol. 6 (1989) (Morris, in 'Banality', also comments de Certeau's work).

institution that defines and stages 'the social' for us. Narratological and generic conventions play their part in this, but equally – or more – important are the ways in which television constructs a calendar of public events and a schedule of private routines, as well as the pedagogic rhetoric of its address simultaneously to the listener/viewer as individual and to the people-nation as One.⁸ True, some of these aspects may be more evident in the peculiarities of British broadcasting than in more fully commercial systems, but this starting point should at least make it possible to incorporate into a coherent scheme of study a variety of relevant topics: national regulation of television and its international circulation; the political economy of television as social good or commodity, the question of 'quality', broadcasting history, technological developments, and so forth – as well as television as ideology and television as part of 'everyday life'.⁹ This strategy would not entail the exclusive use of any single methodology, but would set the scene for a dialogue between competing, and not always compatible, perspectives – perspectives whose explanatory powers and blind spots would have to be assessed in the process.

But, again, what is the point of such work? Given the cultural and political importance of television, and the current fluidity of debates about its future, there is evident need for imaginative policy proposals backed up by thorough research. The contribution of Sheffield City Polytechnic's Cultural Policy Unit to the city's bid to house the new Channel 5 is one topical example.¹⁰ But does the institutionalization of a rather exclusive 'public sphere' in the research centres and consultancies of media studies departments in higher education translate into any obvious agenda for teaching undergraduates or school students about television?

Perhaps we should start at the other end, and ask what students might reasonably expect from us. Vague promises about emancipation or mass consciousness-raising through a 'critical theory' of the media won't cut much ice any more. The unduckable question is whether, and how, media studies courses can enhance the life chances of the students who take them. In those terms, the argument must be that any notion of literacy adequate to the complex technologies and symbolic systems through which power is exercised in modern western societies requires some knowledge of the organization, social functions and semiotic mechanisms of television. The claim is not that creating a literate public will produce social transformation – Williams was right about that – but that such literacy is now a prerequisite even for membership of that public, for being a 'citizen' in any effective sense. Increasingly, too, the ability to produce, process and critically assess information in a variety of media is becoming a routine requirement in cultural and information-based industries – including industries like advertising and marketing which, however much it may offend old prejudices, is

⁸ From a different perspective from my own Paddy Scannell makes this point with some eloquence in his article, 'Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life' *Media Culture and Society* vol. 11 (1989). My approach to broadcasting as apparatus is spelt out in more detail in *Machines of Democracy: Education and Entertainment in Inter-War Britain* *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 30 no. 3 (1988), and 'Interesting Times: Education and Broadcasting in the 1990s' *Critical Social Policy*, January 1990.

⁹ Recent articles on some of these topics include Craig Calhoun 'Populist Politics: Communications Media and Large Scale Societal Integration' *Sociological Theory* vol. 6 (1988), Richard Collins 'White and Green and Not Much Read' *Screen* vol. 30 nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1989), Peter Golding and Graham Murdock 'Pulling the Plugs on Democracy', *New Statesman and Society*, 30 June 1989, John Keane 'Liberty of the Press' in the 1990s *New Formations* no. 8 (1989).

¹⁰ See 'Television 2000: The White Paper on Broadcasting', Sheffield City Council's Response to the Home Office, 1989 (Available from Department of Employment and Economic Development, Palatine Chambers, Pinstone Street, Sheffield S1 2HN).

where many media and cultural studies graduates find employment. To disavow that, to decide not to teach skills and competences that might benefit them in such work, is politically perverse and educationally irresponsible.

Channels of Discourse and *Television Culture* usefully summarize two decades of television research and criticism. But they fail to ask the fundamental questions about the television apparatus, or to formulate an educational rationale for television studies. In making that difficult case, the main options for the coming years seem to be silence, banality or apostasy. Of those three, without hesitation or apology, I'd take apostasy

review article:

Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI Publishing, 1987, 186 pp.

Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI Publishing, 1987, 386 pp.

ANAHID KASSABIAN

WITHIN the academy, mass media music has been strangely silent. The legacy of the high culture/low culture separation and of the privileging of vision has encouraged us either to ignore popular music or, like Adorno, to pronounce it debased. While this legacy has recently come under fire, and the various media – film and television in particular – are being scrutinized for their participation in the production and reproduction of dominant ideologies, music continues to receive little attention. Even in film and television studies, there have been relatively few attempts to discuss the role of background music along the lines of contemporary critical theory.

Until now, that is Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies*. *Narrative Film Music* is the first sustained analysis in English of the functions and principles of music in narrative film since the 1947 publication of Eisler and Adorno's *Composing for the Films*. And her project is no smaller in scope than that sentence implies. *Unheard Melodies* analyses film music within a spectrum of theoretical approaches. Beginning with narratological concerns and moving through history, technology, and industrial forces to a marxist and psychoanalytic theory of the relationship between film music and spectatorship, Gorbman proceeds to lay out the rules of classical Hollywood practice, to summarize and engage Eisler and Adorno's work on the topic, and to provide analyses of films.

If this sounds like a major project, it is. In fact, breadth and scope may be the book's main features, insofar as it has both the

advantages and the drawbacks of wide-ranging works. I have already recommended or given this book to a number of people, because it is unquestionably the most comprehensive treatment of film music currently available. And I would teach from it, as I have already done, for the same reasons: the first five chapters discuss the major issues in the field and contain important original theorizing. The fourth chapter, on Hollywood music practices, should be required reading in introductory film studies courses. Gorbman clearly lays out the parameters of classical composition, mixing and editing, and provides numerous examples to illustrate the principles. In addition to these examples, she works through Max Steiner's score for *Mildred Pierce*, guiding readers in methods of analysing the functions of themes in a film score. She develops a vocabulary that is highly accessible, making it possible for film students and scholars with no musical education to address themselves to the use of music in any particular film.

To address so many concerns, however, seems almost to invite internal contradiction, as is the case in Gorbman's treatment of the relationship between music and narrative. She argues both compellingly and, I think, rightly that image and sound tracks are inseparable and simultaneous in the viewer's experience of a film. But at other points, she uses language which implies that a prior 'story' could exist without the music. For example, in discussing *Hangover Square* she states that 'distinctive idioms and moods of music match characters and narrative moods', and 'the music redundantly reinforces visual information' (pp. 153–4). A 'narrative mood' can pre-exist – either logically or temporally – its musical expression only for production personnel, who add the music in post-production as part of creating a mood. For viewers, however, the mood cannot be 'reinforced' by the music, since we experience the music at the same time as we experience everything else – as the narrative is being produced – and thus there is no mood prior to the music. More importantly, as I think Gorbman successfully argues throughout this book, music carries information of an order different from that in visuals, dialogue, and so on, and consequently cannot be redundant. Her explicit position that music, dialogue, the image track and sound effects form a '*combinatoire* of expression' (pp. 15–16) is far more powerful and productive for analyses of specific films and for theorizing music's participation in the construction of spectatorship.

Such an extensive set of concerns also virtually guarantees varying degrees of expertise. What might be called the social semiotics of music is a weakness here. The assumptions behind Gorbman's three musical codes – the pure, the cultural, and the cinematic – are being challenged by a new group of musicologists. Pure musical codes, Gorbman says, 'generat[e] musical discourse; music on this level refers to music itself' (p. 13). Susan McClary, however, suggests that

1 Tonality refers to the practices of almost all western music since roughly 1600 with the exception of certain twentieth-century art music practices

2 Susan McClary A Musical Dialectic from the Enlightenment, *Cultural Critique* no. 4 (1986) pp. 134–35

there can be no ‘pure’ music or musical codes. She has demonstrated the ideological functions of tonality,¹ which includes the vast majority of film music: in being both goal-oriented and highly rule-bound, tonal compositions ‘articulate a social world organized by means of values such as rational control and goal-oriented striving for progress – the values upon which leaders of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie traditionally have grounded their claim to legitimacy, authority, and “universality”’.² Musical structures, styles and idioms, McClary suggests, are never without reference to their culture, and all musics reproduce their cultures’ messages for listeners. Thus, in claiming a place for ‘pure’ music, Gorbman denies the ideological work of bourgeois musical language. Relatedly, while suggesting that standard practices depend on Romantic tonality because it is more efficient, she does not address why a musical language from the last century is more efficient than, for example, contemporary popular styles.

Nowhere, on the other hand, have I seen as informative a discussion of how sound and music create space and depth of field (what might be termed ‘sound perspective’). In her analysis of *Sous les toits de Paris* and elsewhere, Gorbman provides an insightful model of how to analyse auditory space. She argues that consistent auditory space is necessary for a film’s diegesis, and that Clair’s work violates the space (for example, by masking sounds which ought to be audible with sounds that should not be) often enough to call the diegesis into question. Similarly, her discussion of the connections between muzak and film music, comprising what she terms ‘functional music’, makes the ideological functions of both practices abundantly clear, and forcefully reminds us why studies of music such as *Unheard Melodies* must become an integral feature of any cultural studies, critical theory, or media studies agenda.

The same legacy that long silenced film music as an object of analysis has had other consequences as well. The musical, on both film and stage, has been cast aside as mere entertainment, bad music, bad theatre, or bad filmmaking. The songs of musicals are ignored by music scholars, and the musical is underrepresented in film genre studies – though in film studies, at least, there are three books in English which stand out as exceptions – Jane Feuer’s *The Hollywood Musical*; *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman, and his recent book, *The American Film Musical*.

Devoted to the questions raised both by the musical in particular and by genre studies more broadly, *The American Film Musical* is extremely informative and informed, and, like *Unheard Melodies*, is quite broadly conceived. Altman addresses genre theory, history and criticism, as well as the style, structure, and history of musicals and of its three subgenres (‘fairy-tale’, ‘show’, and ‘folk’ musicals). Altman’s history and analysis of these subgenres explains more about the history of the film musical and its relationship to

Broadway than any other discussion I have seen. The path from Vienna to New York to Hollywood is well-worn, but finally here is a model which says that this is not the only one worth following. Altman argues that Viennese operetta, which came to New York in the mid-1880s, gave American audiences a chance to engage desires which were socially forbidden – overt, adult, and often adulterous, sexual desire – and laid the groundwork for the ‘fairy-tale musical’. The ‘show musical’, however, had its roots in minstrel shows, vaudeville and burlesque, and took Broadway as its content rather than its source. It used the film medium to play out a different relationship with theatre and with spectatorship: a particularly male, voyeuristic relationship. The third path between Hollywood and Broadway is defined by a history of mutual exchange, during which process the ‘folk musical’, with its matriarchal concentration on domestic space, the community and the ‘everydayness’ of song and dance, arose. This history, or group of histories, generates many more possibilities than its traditional counterpart for theory and criticism.

Altman argues at length for the productive value of a semantic/syntactic approach to genre studies. I am most often doubtful about such distinctions, but Altman does a good job of pointing out the ways in which semantics (static features such as setting) and syntax (plot typologies) generate each other, while arguing that definitions of a genre often tacitly rest on one or the other. He suggests that a more fruitful genre definition could be found by establishing both a broad semantically defined corpus and a narrower syntactically motivated one. A more useful history could be written, he suggests, by accounting for the relationship between semantics and syntax, which he then proceeds to do. The history described above develops in part from a view that genres begin with static semantic features – musicals are films with a lot of diegetic music – and proceed to develop a syntax – musicals move forward through the plot of a developing romance. Convinced as I was by the history, I also became convinced of the value of the semantic/syntactic approach for genre history.

That this semantic/syntactic approach provides a negotiation between what Altman calls ritual and ideological practices did not, however, convince me. According to Altman, ritual critics focus on the audience’s ritual relationship to genres as myth, ideological critics are concerned with representation and identification, and less with narrative. Since the ritual approach suggests that Hollywood responds to audience demands, while the ideological approach argues that audiences respond to Hollywood’s demands, the two have seemed mutually exclusive. However, Altman argues, when a semantic genre is stabilized into a syntactic one it is because ‘the audience’s ritual values coincide with Hollywood’s ideological ones’ (p. 99). Nowhere does he discuss how those ritual values are

constructed or what relationship they might have to Hollywood and the larger cultural production industry. This leads to some glaring peculiarities in his overall argument. While his definition of the musical rests on a sexual dichotomy onto which other dichotomies are mapped, there is little analysis of gender ideologies and no comment, even in passing, on the blatant heterosexism of this model. He even goes so far as to say that the folk musical, by consistently representing domestic space and taming the male with its female, civilizing viewpoint, is 'the matriarchal form *par excellence*' (p. 317). This female point of view comes not from women's visual and narrative pleasure, nor from a critical mass of female production personnel, but rather from the fact that the films tend to represent the spaces and values which patriarchy has ascribed to women. It is clear in many of these films that the men get to roam around having fun until they are coerced into staying put like the women with the women. I wonder how matriarchal or specifically female this really is, given that it sounds a great deal like the 1950s male nightmare articulated by the Beats, James Dean, Philip Wylie, and so many others. In the absence of analyses of the ideologies behind his observations, Altman's proposition that he can mediate between ritual and ideological approaches falls short of its promise.

The style of *The American Film Musical* raises the question of the readership it is addressing. On the one hand, Altman writes in a 'plain language' style, making the text for the most part accessible to a wide audience. He lays out his arguments carefully and clearly, providing numerous examples. On the other hand, he uses terms like 'psychic economy', 'use value', 'exchange value', and others which refer to specific theoretical traditions. Often these terms are without definitions, as part of a point made in passing. For example, arguing that Fred Astaire negotiates function and legend, Altman says 'legend is pure exchange value, life depends on use value' (p. 79); while I might disagree with this, I would have appreciated more than a sentence on what he means by it. If the reader is presumed to be familiar with these terms, then the balance of argument needs to be shifted, with more weight given to such complex ideas. On the other hand, if the reader is presumed to be someone unfamiliar with marxism, psychoanalysis, and so forth, the definitions should have been carefully worked out.

It would have been useful as well to see more on the notion that genres serve a repressive function, in this case because I found the idea quite powerful. Altman argues that by establishing a regular syntax, genres make certain relationships, and thus certain meanings, virtually impossible. How does this repressive function affect the major issues of genre theories? Does a genre inherently rule out 'resistant' or 'against-the-grain' readings of individual texts, and if so, what do excluded viewers do? Or is the strength of the

genre's repressive function actually to make resistant readings possible? Assuming there is such a thing as 'generic literacy', must it be acquired through direct contact with the genre's texts? How does this repressive function relate to Hollywood films in general? Does this approach lead to sweeping statements about Hollywood ideologies? Thinking of genres as 'ideological interference in the process of interpretation' (p. 118) can, and I hope will, provoke interesting new scholarship.

Together, these two books constitute a significant contribution to film studies. *The American Film Musical* retrieves the musical from the shadows, and sets the stage for a reexamination of genre histories. *Unheard Melodies* makes a strong, albeit tacit, case for major changes in the curricula of music departments, and overtly demands that music be taken seriously as a part of any film theory or criticism. Perhaps together they will encourage a study of the music of musicals. Most certainly, they are important steps in the establishment of a new field: the cultural study of music.